THE QUESTS OF PAUL BECK

BY McDONNELL BODKIN

1910
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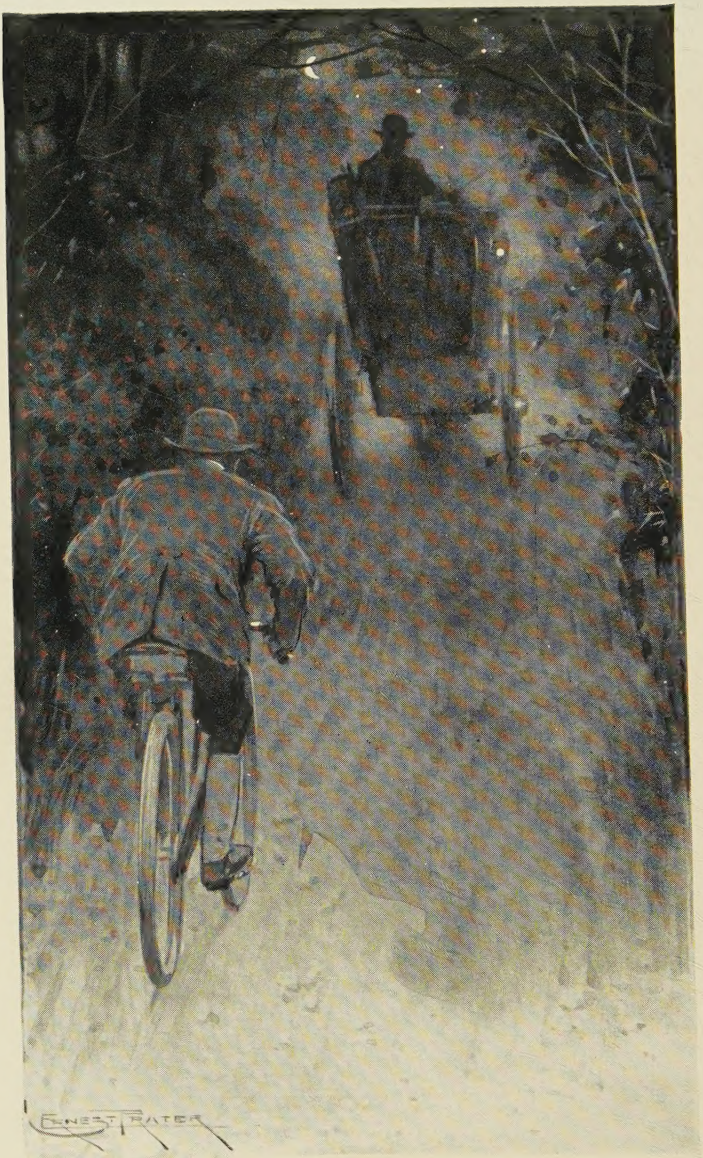

"Slowly the hansom came back to him. The outline grew clearer and darker. Nearer and nearer he crept." *(See page 198.)*

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By

McDONNELL BODKIN

ILLUSTRATED BY ERNEST PRATER

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1910

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INTRODUCTION

It may be objected that among all these stories there is no record of failure on the part of Mr Beck. The incredulous question will be asked: Was he always successful? The answer may be given in a confidential whisper; he was not; nearly always, not quite. But only his successes are published because the details are largely derived from after-dinner chats with the unconscious Mr Beck himself. Like other people less famous he did not like to talk much about his failures. Besides, it would be hardly fair to put them into print if he did. There is another reason stronger still. Failures make dull stories. To anyone who has read his adventures it must be plain that Mr Beck is not devoid of that natural, unaffected vanity which is one of the most agreeable of social qualities because it is so conducive to good humour. He was surprised, but he did not even pretend to be displeased, when he found himself famous. He was frankly delighted at the popularity his adventures obtained, not merely in Great Britain and Ireland, but in France, Germany and Sweden, where they have been translated and published in sixpenny editions. It is with his express permission that the following stories are told. "They are too flattering," he said, and, unlike other people who say that, he meant it. It will be for the readers to judge if he was right.

THE QUESTS OF PAUL BECK

I

THE VOICE FROM THE DEAD

PLAINLY Mr Beck was just about to start on a journey. Piled together in the middle of his study floor were a bulging Gladstone bag, strapped and locked, an overcoat, a travelling-rug, a salmon rod, a trout rod, and a fishing-basket.

He looked up over his shoulder from his desk, where he was finishing a letter. "You might fetch a hansom, Burns," he said to his factotum, who was putting his things together.

"Yes, sir," said Burns, and started for the door.

Then the telephone bell rang in its little glass closet in the corner of the room.

"See to that, Burns. Tell whoever it is that I have gone off to the country. It's only anticipating the truth by a minute or so."

"Yes, sir."

"Halloa! Are you there? Yes; are you there?" —the usual interchanges went on.

"Yes," Mr Beck heard Burns say. "No; gone

away to the country, left no address. Cannot be done. I tell you it's impossible."

"Well?" asked Mr Beck.

"Must see you, sir. I said you had left no address. Says someone must know where you are. Most important."

"They all say that if a teaspoon is stolen."

"She says it's a matter of life and death," said Burns.

"She?" Mr Beck got up from his chair.

"Yes, sir; a lady's voice, particular clear and most distinct, sir."

A smile wrinkled Burns' face as he made way for his master at the telephone.

It was a lady's voice that spoke—a very pleasant voice despite the metallic twang of the instrument.

"Mr Beck? Is it really! Oh! I'm so glad. I knew I should find you. I want you here at once. Yes, Ringwood Castle; you know Simon Rutherford—he has been missing for two days. Yes, we have searched everywhere. I'm his daughter, his only child, Josephine Rutherford. Do please come at once. Oh! thanks ever so much."

"Burns," said Mr Beck, ruefully turning from the telephone, "you may put those rods back. I'm not going fishing—for fish."

"But I thought, sir—"

"Never mind what you thought. Go and call a hansom and put the bag in it. I'll catch the 10.40 if you look sharp."

The case *was* important. Simon Rutherford, the millionaire, had vanished out of the palace he had built for himself on the slope of a sunny hill amid

embowering trees—vanished from the midst of an army of attendants. "Here," thought Mr Beck, as he leant back in the first-class carriage of the train that he had caught with a second to spare, "is a problem worth solving." The pleasant voice that called to him for help through the telephone made the problem more exciting.

A small electric motor waited for him at the station and bowled him along a broad, smooth road to Ringwood Castle.

For half its length the avenue of chestnut trees, which were huge cones of flower, ran up a steep incline. At a curve Mr Beck caught sight of the Castle, and was startled by its magnificence. Mr Rutherford, when he purchased the estate from the impoverished Lord Hazelton, had pulled down the crazy family mansion and had built Ringwood Castle on its site. He was fortunate in his architect and in his own supreme ignorance of architecture. The stately building of grey stone, with towers massive yet graceful, that rose above the tallest of the trees, crowned the hill superbly, and harmonised with the surrounding landscape.

The motor wheeled like a swallow on the wing, and left Mr Beck at the door.

A girl waited for him in the hall and captured him the moment he appeared. A tall girl, with the figure of Diana, and gold hair coiled like a crown on her shapely head.

"So glad you've come!" she cried impetuously, as she led him along the corridor to a spacious room that looked out through a French window on the garden. The room might have been mistaken for

a bachelor's "den" but for its neatness and the absence of tobacco.

There were golf clubs, and tennis racquets and fishing rods. But there was also a couple of bookcases with rows of standard books in honest, workaday binding, meant for use not show. The place, with its light wicker chairs and its spindle-shanked tables, was neat as a captain's cabin.

"Sit down there," the girl said, pushing a comfortable chair to Mr Beck, "and let me introduce myself. I'm Josephine Rutherford, only daughter of the man who has vanished. I sent for you because I needed you horribly."

Mr Beck smiled. His eyes swept the room at one glance, and lighted on a man seated in a low chair at the corner furthest from the door.

"That's Mr Herbert Ross, M.P. He knows who you are. I don't mean to keep any secrets from you, Mr Beck. Mr Ross and I are engaged to be married."

Mr Beck had already guessed her secret as he summed up the man at a glance. Tall—so far as could be judged from the loose stretch of his long limbs as he lay back in his low chair—handsome, too, after a fashion; a dark, intelligent, keen face alive with intense earnestness—the face of a man not easily to be baulked in anything he had set his heart on.

His dark eyes searched the face of the detective, who nodded and smiled at the introduction.

"Mr Ross belongs to what I have to say, Mr Beck," Miss Rutherford went on. "I'll say it as quick as I can, because I may be interrupted.

"We met first—Mr Ross and myself—when he came down here to contest the seat against father and won it. I went to one of his meetings and liked his speech immensely. We met afterwards and became friends, and to make a long story short he liked me, and we got engaged to be married. Father was furious. Herbert is poor, of course—he is a barrister in London and hasn't much practice yet.

"But it was not that so much which made father mad. He never could forgive one who had thwarted him, and he had set his heart on a seat in Parliament, so Herbert was forbidden the house.

"I was ordered not to write to him, an order to which I didn't pay the least attention. About a week later a young widow—at least, she said she was a widow—was brought down here to be a companion to me. You will see Lucy Lalladay presently, so I won't say a word that might prejudice you against her. I didn't like her, I may say that much, but father did immensely. He could do nothing without consulting her—had her constantly in his study, where I was never allowed, and later went on pleasure trips to London with her. He was infatuated with her—" She broke off suddenly.

"Mr Beck, I am as certain as I can be that this wretched woman is at the bottom of his disappearance."

"But you have told me nothing yet about his disappearance, Miss Rutherford," said Mr Beck, ignoring the sudden onslaught on the widow.

"Oh! there is very little to tell. Father had just come home from a trip with this woman—the way she made eyes at him was disgusting! The

next afternoon he was in the study alone with Mr Mark Strangley, his private secretary. Mr Strangley had left the room for a few moments, and when he came back my father had disappeared. Mr Strangley thought little about it at the time.

"There is a glass door opening on the lawn, and he fancied perhaps father had gone out for a stroll. But when father didn't come in to dinner we had a search made for him through the grounds. It was no use. Then there was another surprise. That woman confessed that they had been married a week ago in London by special licence, and pretended to go into hysterics, to make matters worse. Well, we had a farther search next day, but still no sign; so—"

"You sent for me," said Mr Beck. "Anything more?"

"Oh, yes! There is another thing most important. Herbert comes to see me, of course, whenever he can spare time from his work in London—sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening. He was seen about the place. He is well known, and there have been whispers."

"Not to put too fine a point on it, Mr Beck," spoke up Herbert Ross from his corner, "I am strongly suspected of having murdered Mr Simon Rutherford."

"Father is not dead," persisted the daughter; "no one would kill him except that woman, and she couldn't if she wanted to. You will find him for us, Mr Beck?"

"I will try," said Mr Beck.

"Would you like to see the study now?"

"Why, certainly, but I would like just one word

more with you before we go. What kind of man is this secretary? I can guess what you think of Mrs Lalladay, or I should say Mrs Rutherford"—the daughter winced at the name, but Mr Beck did not seem to notice. "Now I want to know what you think of Mr Mark Strangley?"

"Oh! he is a good sort enough; not too clever perhaps, but honest and straight as a die. For the first few days after she came I thought he was going to fall in love with the widow, but he soon found her out. Afterwards he used to laugh at her with me, and was almost as indignant as myself at the way she played upon father's folly. He even spoke to him about it, and was sharply told to mind his own business. It was Mark—Mr Strangley I mean—that advised me to telephone for you."

Again Mr Herbert Ross spoke straight out from his corner. "I have seen Mark Strangley only three times," he said, "and I believe him to be a thoroughpaced scoundrel. Well, well, Joe," good-humouredly but firmly withal to the girl, who was about to protest, "we are not likely to agree on this point. Time may tell who's right."

Then to Mr Beck very courteously: "I have heard of you, sir, in many quarters and always in high praise. I am glad you have come. If any man living can unravel this mystery it is you. Good-bye, Joe. I cannot stay here, you know. I have taken a room at the Star and Anchor. It's not a quarter of a mile off, Mr Beck, and I will come at a word if you want me."

The two lovers stood for a moment together at the door. Mr Beck happened to be busy with a note-

book at the moment and did not look up till the girl spoke to him again.

Something of the life and buoyancy was gone out of her voice and face when her lover left.

"You would like to see the study now?"

The study was a wide, airy room on the right of the hall, with a great, ebony roll-top American desk in the centre. The floor was of polished oak, with no rug or carpet to mar the rich, glossy expanse. The walls, painted a rich maroon, made an effective background for masterpieces of Romney, Gainsborough, and Reynolds—high-waisted, full-bosomed beauties, simpering seductively.

Other ornament there was none. An electric foot-warmer cushioned in furs was under the comfortable arm-chair at the desk, an electric cigar-lighter was at the writer's elbow, electric lamps—standard and suspended—were everywhere. There were half a dozen phonographs in the room, each perched on a little table of its own with high rubber castors that glided at a touch over the polished floor.

On the left of the desk was the door from the hall; to the right a large French window looked upon the lawn. Facing the writer as he sat at his desk was a huge safe ten feet square, painted, like the walls, a dark maroon, with polished brass handles.

It was the first thing that took Mr Beck's attention. He walked straight to it and tried the handle.

"Locked," said Miss Josephine; "my father had the key when he disappeared. Oh! is that you, Mark; how quietly you come in! Mr Beck, this is my father's secretary, Mr Strangley, who asked me to send for you."

Mr Beck's genial smile expressed his gratitude while his keen eyes studied Mr Mark Strangley.

It was an easy book to read. The figure of an athlete, clean and strong, a handsome face, blue-eyed, flaxen-haired, not too clever, and boyish for his age, which might be thirty. This was Mark Strangley as Mr Beck first saw him.

"Glad to see you, sir," he said, with hearty welcome, as he took Mr Beck's hand in a firm grasp. "I'm glad for Miss Rutherford's sake, for all our sakes, that you have come."

Miss Rutherford seemed to hesitate for a moment. "Perhaps I'd better leave you two alone," she said.

Plainly she wanted to be asked to stay, but Mr Beck did not ask her. On the contrary, he gallantly held the door open for her.

"You will find me in my own room when you want me," she said as she passed out.

"A charming young lady," said Mr Beck when the door had closed.

"A queen," said Mr Strangley, in accents of undisguised adoration; "I pity her from the bottom of my heart."

"But why pity?"

"First for the loss of her father, then—Oh! come in"—impatiently.

There had come a timid tap to the door.

As it opened softly Mr Strangley's impatience changed to deferential welcome. "Mrs Lalladay," he said very gently, "I beg pardon, I should say Mrs Rutherford; this is Mr Beck, the famous detective, of whom you have heard me speak."

Mr Beck, turning round, saw the most lovely woman he had ever looked at. All the old-fashioned similes were wanted to describe her: cheeks like the rose-leaf, eyes blue as the violet, hair like fine gold, alive with wave and curl. She was small, but of figure marvellously erect, lithe, delicately poised as a fairy. The winsome little lady was dressed all in black, plain, close-fitting black—a perfect foil to her rare beauty.

She divided an appealing smile between the two men.

"Is there any news?" she asked. The question was to Mr Strangley, but Mr Beck was not excluded.

"None yet," Mark Strangley answered, "but we must not despair. While there's life there's hope, you know. If any man living can find your husband Mr Beck can and will."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" She looked Mr Beck full in the eyes, and then gave him her hand impulsively—a white, shapely, firm little hand. As usual, his kindly face induced confidence. "They say I didn't love my husband," she complained, "because he was older than I; that I married him for his money; but it's false. I couldn't help his leaving everything to me—could I? But I loved him for himself alone, and now that I have lost him my heart is broken. We had a little quarrel that morning. I spoke in favour of his daughter and vexed him. He left me in anger, and I may never see him again." The violet eyes were bright with tears, but she held them back bravely. "I will give you everything I have in the world if you find him for me."

Beauty in distress always appealed to Mr Beck.

"There is no use meeting trouble half-way," he said kindly. "Reward or no reward, you may be sure I'll find him if I can." He did not add "for your sake," but it was plain from his tone that he meant it.

A fleeting blush showed she knew he meant it. "I won't keep you from your work," she said. "I wish you all good luck and Godspeed."

Mark Strangley held the door open for her as she went out.

Mr Beck's eyes were on his face. "If that man is not in love with the widow," Mr Beck thought, "he is a very fine actor."

"Let us get to work," he said briskly, when the door closed. "There has been already too much delay."

"Won't you have lunch first?"

"No, work first, if you please—lunch later. How long were you out of the room when he disappeared?"

"About five minutes, not more."

"Could he not have gone out by the same door that you went by?"

"Impossible. He would have to pass through the room where I was looking for a paper he sent me for."

"Then he must have gone out through the glass door?"

"So it would seem, unless he went up the chimney."

Mr Beck did not resent the sneer. "Yes," he said, "it seems quite obvious, but one cannot afford to take even the obvious for granted."

He had opened the glass door and looked out.

The path ran in full view for at least a quarter of a mile.

"If he had gone that way you must have seen him when you returned," he said to Mr Strangley, who had come up to the door and looked through over his shoulder.

"Unless he had turned in on the grass, past that clump of trees to the right," Strangley answered.

"Quite so," said Mr Beck, approvingly. "I expected you to say just that. I wonder is it too late to find any sign? Come along!"

Bending low he scrutinised the edge of the pathway closely as he walked. Twice he found a break in the clean-cut edge, examined it carefully and went on. The third time he found the mark of one of the new-fashioned round rubber heels in the turf. The ground had been soft when the mark was made—it was hard now. The segment of the circular heel was cut deep and clear.

"Mr Rutherford wore rubber heels," he said to the other, rather as one who makes a statement than one who asks a question.

Strangley nodded. Mr Beck was on his knees on the grass sward with a magnifying glass close to the ground. He put the grass softly aside as a surgeon parts the hair to examine a scalp wound.

"Was Mr Rutherford a heavy man?"

Mr Strangley did not hear him at first, and he repeated the question. "Well, no, he was rather light and wiry, but he had big feet, if that's what you mean."

"Right," said Mr Beck, "here is a full footmark." He got up from his knees and walked on briskly,

picking up the trail as if it were the " scent " of a paper-chase, though Strangley's eyes could find only a few vague marks amongst the grass. The track skirted the woods and led them to the banks of a deep, dumb river that ran slowly, level with its brim. Along the banks of the river the track led them for about a mile, tending always away from the house.

Under the shelter of a clump of beech Mr Beck stopped short and began to cast about like a sporting dog that makes a dead set, weakens on it when he finds the bird has just left, and begins beating cautiously again. He examined every mark about the place with scrupulous care, went on about twenty yards to where the river was crossed by a new iron bridge, and walked a little with bent head on the further side. Mr Strangley watched him curiously all the time, till he came back at last to the place where he had first pointed his game, and looked fixedly at the water.

Then very quietly he said to Mr Strangley: " Mr Rutherford's body is out there, under the water."

Mr Strangley gasped, and no wonder; the colour left his face. He gazed at Mr Beck dumbfounded.

" Sure? " he asked at last in a frightened whisper.

" As sure as you and I are on the banks he is under the water. We can do no more at present. Let us get back now and have that lunch you spoke about. After lunch we will drag the river and bring the body home."

They walked in silence by the water's edge back to

the house. In the midst of the brightness of the fair scene and sunshine, of green leaf and singing birds, they were haunted by the tragedy hidden by the dark water of the deep stream that moved so stealthily under the trees.

"Say nothing to the ladies," whispered Mr Strangley, as they went back through the French window, "until you are quite sure."

"I am quite sure," replied Mr Beck, "but I shall say nothing."

His certainty was justified. Out of the dark depths of the river, at the very spot he pointed to, the men fished up the draggled body of Mr Rutherford, millionaire. The pockets of the dead man's coat bulged with stones. A horrid sight the body was as it lay there on the soft grass under the trees, while the moving boughs let the sunshine trickle through, and the birds sang unconscious of the horror.

Again Mr Strangley's first kindly thought was for the women.

"We must get him quietly to the house."

Mr Beck nodded.

"Have the coroner sent for," he added; "we should have the inquest to-morrow."

The body was composed in decent state, the staring eyes closed, the grey hands crossed over the breast, before his wife and daughter were told of the ghastly discovery.

Mr Beck watched them closely as they came, one after the other, into the room with the dead.

The daughter made no display of violent grief. She moved softly to the bedside and kissed the poor, clammy forehead with a kiss that seemed to have in

it as much of forgiveness as of affection. She knelt for a moment at the bedside and went out quietly as she entered.

The widow, on the other hand, was distraught. "I loved him, I loved him," she cried continuously, "and now I shall never see him again. It was I drove him to it. I was unkind to him. I am his murderess."

From the first she assumed he had committed suicide, and the jury's verdict justified her instinct. They found the customary verdict with the charitable addition, "during temporary insanity."

Mr Beck's work was done, but he remained a day or two at the special invitation of the widow, who, when the first paroxysm of her grief was passed, was lavish in childlike admiration and gratitude.

"But for you," she exclaimed, "we should never have found him. My life would have passed in a long agony of suspense. Horrible as the truth is the suspense would have been more horrible. He would never have lain in consecrated ground. I could never have watered his grave with my tears."

Not she alone, but all the neighbourhood were full of wonder and admiration at the skill with which the detective went straight to the root of the mystery.

There was one exception—Miss Joe Rutherford was not in the least enthusiastic. If Mr Beck expected congratulations from her when she summoned him to her bachelor's den he was disappointed.

He found her standing at the great bow window, and before she turned had time to admire the grace of that tall, pliant figure clear against the evening

light. He noticed as she turned that the comely face was pale, and the eyelids red with weeping.

"Sit down," she said abruptly. "I suppose I ought to thank you, but I cannot. The thing you have done is very clever and all that. But what does it come to? You have found the body, but you have not found the cause of death."

"The coroner's jury have found that," replied Mr Beck, innocently, "as was their business, and they have found it to be suicide."

"I don't believe it; I don't believe a word of it. Do you?"

The question was a sharp home-thrust—the frank eyes looked straight in his.

But Mr Beck never winced.

"I don't see what other verdict the jury could find," he answered slowly. "The body was in the water; the footprints leading to the river were made by the boots on his feet; the doctor testified that he died of suffocation; there were no external marks on the body, except that the nails and knuckles were bruised and torn, but bruised knuckles and nails don't kill a man."

"How were they bruised and torn?"

"How can I tell? The coroner and the coroner's jury could not tell that. How can I?"

"Oh, I thought that you clever detectives knew everything."

He spread out his big hands deprecatingly like a clumsy Frenchman.

"My dear young lady, did I ever pretend to be clever, did I now? We detectives are like children with puzzle alphabets. We pick up letters here and

there and try to get them in their proper order to spell out a word or two. Don't smack me if I cannot get the letters right at first. I'm doing my best all the time."

Something in the contagious good-humour of the man captured her.

Her face lightened with a smile. "Forgive me," she said, "I'm an ungrateful, selfish thing. I know you did your best—and more than anyone else could do. I'm worried—you mustn't mind me. I suppose you heard that father left all he died possessed of to his widow? Mr Strangley drew the will and witnessed it, and never said a word, and he pretended to be fond of me. Oh, the cur! I'm sure it was she put him up to it."

"Do you stay on here?" Mr Beck asked sympathetically.

"Do I stay here! As if I would stay an hour longer than I could help under the same roof with that woman. I wouldn't take a crust of bread or a glass of water from her if I was starving and it was to save my life. There is an animal in India Kipling wrote about that knows a snake the first time it sees one, and wants to kill it. I feel just like that."

"She speaks most kindly of you."

"Of course she does. Aren't snakes always slimy? She came gushing to me here. She said we were sisters in sorrow—'let us weep together on his tomb.' I answered her pretty plainly."

"I'll warrant you did," said Mr Beck under his breath.

"But I could not vex her. Nothing I could say would vex her. She was most loving to the very last.

She—she wanted to kiss me." There was a break in her voice as she said it, but not even Mr Beck could say whether it was laughter or tears. "I am going away this evening," she went on calmly.

"Where?"

"Anywhere out of this."

"Don't go this evening. I'm staying over to-night. I may want you to-morrow."

"But," she began, but her eyes met Mr Beck's, grave, determined, all the smile gone from his face.

"I'll stay," she said, "if you wish it."

His finger went suddenly to his lips commanding silence. Then he pointed to the door.

His ears were quicker than hers, for after a long silence there came a gentle, timid knock.

Mr Beck turned the handle and opened the door, but he stepped aside as the young widow, more lovely than ever, more delicately *spirituelle* in her widow's weeds, came softly in.

The detective watched the high comedy of the meeting with quiet interest and amusement.

"I have returned," cooed the widow, softly, with hands stretched out in sweet entreaty.

"So I see," answered the girl, with implacable coldness. "May I ask why?"

"Oh! Josephine, Josephine!" cried the other, plaintively, "why will you reject my love? I want to be a sister to you."

"Look here, Mrs Lalladay, if that's your name, what's the use of telling these lies to me when you know I don't believe them; when you know that I know you hate me just as much as I hate you, and that's enough? You managed to get between my

father and myself. His eyes were blinded; mine are not. I know you from your heel to your top-knot. You have got all his money. You have robbed me of that. Cannot you be satisfied? Why must you worry me as well? "

" Why will you speak in this cruel way? "

" You want to get rid of me. Well, I am going to-morrow."

" I thought you said to-night."

The widow did not seem delighted at the change.

Joe Rutherford smiled scornfully.

" Mr Beck asked me to stay till to-morrow to have his company to London."

" I'm so glad," gushed the widow, correcting her mistake, " you have changed your mind. To-morrow I may persuade you to prolong your stay. Good-bye, dearest; good-bye, Mr Beck, I am very grateful to you too."

" You may have reason to be," Mr Beck said to himself as she left the room.

" Miss Rutherford," he added aloud when the door was closed, " I would advise you to telegraph for Mr Ross. I may have some startling news for you to-morrow. By the way, could you lend me an alarm clock? You are an open-air, early-rising young lady, likely to have one. Thanks! No, no, I answer no questions until to-morrow. I never speak till I am quite sure."

The greater part of the night Mr Beck spent in the dead man's study with the doors locked and no company but the pictures, the great safe and the phonographs.

Mr Strangley thought he heard loud shouting in

the room, and came out in his pyjamas to reconnoitre. Mr Beck opened the door to his knocking.

"Thought I heard shouting," Strangley said; "did you hear anything?"

"Nothing louder than my own voice," Mr Beck returned, smiling.

"Why the deuce didn't you go to your bed?" Strangley asked. "What are you doing here?"

"Thinking," Mr Beck answered gravely. "I am pretty nearly done."

"Well, good luck, anyway. I'm off."

Next morning, when the two men were breakfasting alone, by Mr Beck's special request, in the spacious study, Strangley reverted to the incident of the night before.

"Twopence for your thoughts, Beck," he said laughingly; "what were you pondering over last night?"

"The Rutherford mystery," Mr Beck answered gravely.

For a moment the other seemed taken quite aback by this unexpected reply.

"But there is no mystery now," he objected; "the puzzle has been solved, thanks to you, old man; a commonplace suicide after all."

"I'm not so sure of that," Mr Beck answered. "The evidence doesn't show how he got to the water."

"There were his own footprints leading straight to the bank."

"The footprints were heavier than so light a man could make. Besides, I found close to the place the faint trace of a stockinged foot. What if the

murderer, wearing the dead man's boots, had carried the corpse on his back to the river and changed the boots to the dead man's feet before he threw it in? "

Mr Strangley grew pale at the horrible suggestion. "But the man was drowned, suffocated," he stammered.

"He was suffocated," Mr Beck answered, "but was he drowned? There was no water found in the lungs, and then the hands were bruised and torn as if the wretched man, trapped in a living tomb, had beaten them in vain against the iron wall." Mr Beck's voice shook with the horror of his own imagining.

His companion was strangely affected. His face was ghastly, his eyes staring. He wiped a clammy forehead with a trembling hand. He seemed listening for some terrible sound.

It came! In the long pause suddenly it came.

There was quick beating of hands against the door of the great iron safe, and a faint cry of "Help! Help!" was heard, stifled and strangled by the iron walls.

Then Mark Strangley lost all self-control. "The dead speaks!" he cried, "the dead speaks! I will confess! I will confess! I murdered him! As he stood at the safe I thrust him in and slammed the door and locked it. That night I carried the body to the river. I murdered him—she enticed me to it. She had married him for his money; she hated him; she swore she would marry me when he was dead!"

The sudden opening of the door cut short his confession. The widow dashed into the room, not soft and gentle now, but tense with rage. The fury

of the wild cat—fierce, untamable—flamed from her eyes.

"You lie, you coward!" she screamed, "you coward and fool! If you murdered my husband you shall hang. I know nothing of it."

"Did you not urge me to it?"

"Never! Never!"

"And promise to marry me when he was dead?"

"Marry you, you wretched fool and craven!"

There was an infinite contempt in her voice which stung him to the quick.

"You shall pay for this," he cried, "though I hang for it!"

"Do your worst, fool—do your worst! You have no scrap of writing of mine, no particle of proof. You are the murderer—you cannot turn King's evidence. I know that much law. No one will believe your lies. I defy you! I defy you!" She pointed a small, white finger at him and laughed derisively. "I defy you, and your wise detective, and that great, stupid ploughman-girl—curse her! I defy you all!" She turned to Beck. "I don't care a farthing whether you hang that fool there or not. I have the will. Everything is mine."

Hereupon in his turn Mark Strangley broke into loud, derisive laughter.

"If I hang, my lady, you will starve!" he cried. "You know the law, do you? Then you know that the will was revoked by marriage. You revoked it yourself when you married the man you murdered. The will is not worth the paper it is written on."

There was a ring of truth in the man's savage triumph.

"Before Mr. Beck could interfere she turned the red, smoking blade on her own breast."

o face page 22.

The woman glared like a wild beast trapped—ready to bite and claw.

She turned again to Mr Beck.

"Is that true?"

"Quite true."

With a snarl she sprang like a wild cat on Strangley. A knife leapt out and flashed in the sunlight as she plunged it once, twice in his heart. Before Mr Beck could interfere she turned the red, smoking blade on her own breast, and sank beside her victim on the floor.

At that moment there came a knocking at the door.

Mr Beck rushed to turn the key in the lock.

"Who's there?" he called out.

"It's I, Joe Rutherford. You said you would have exciting news for me."

"I have. The mystery is solved, the tragedy ended," answered Mr Beck, through the closed door. "You shall know all later."

A month later he told the strange story in detail to Joe Rutherford, heiress, and Herbert Ross, her affianced husband.

"I was right," whispered the girl, with pale lips. "I knew the woman was the murderess. I am sorry for poor Strangley."

"He got his deserts. He was the viler of the two," retorted Ross, fiercely.

"But how came that voice?" queried the girl. "How came that voice from the dead to force him to confess? Did he imagine it was a real voice he heard?"

"It was very real," replied Mr Beck. "The night before I prepared that little surprise for him. I set

a phonograph in the safe with an alarum clock to start it at the right moment. I worked up to the crowning horror. I guessed the voice from the dead would drag a confession from the murderer, and I was right."

II

TRIFLES LIGHT AS AIR

It was written in a neat, feminine hand that contrasted strangely with its purport; not a letter out of place, not a comma missed, not an "i" undotted or a "t" uncrossed. Mr Beck read the note for the third time with a frown of perplexity on his good-humoured face.

"Dear Sir,"—it ran—"I feel I have no right whatever to trouble you, and cannot complain if you throw my letter aside. But from what I have heard and read about you it seems just possible that you will help, and the chance, however remote, is worth taking. There has been a terrible murder here. Squire Ackland has been shot through the heart. His nephew, Mr Richard Ackland, was found guilty of murder at the Coroner's inquest to-day, and everyone says the evidence was conclusive. But the Rev. Archdeacon Greaves believes him innocent, and he has had the best opportunity of judging. I am sure he would be anxious that the matter should be placed in your hands. But I have not told him I am writing, lest you should refuse.—Yours faithfully, Alice Dale.

"*P.S.*—The railway station is Woodland, on the Great Southern Line. The rectory is a mile and a half from the station. I have no money to pay you."

"Now what does it all mean?" pondered Mr Beck. "The girl wants me down on her own account. She has some strong interest in Mr Richard Ackland. What is it—for or against? Who is she, anyway, and where does the parson come in? She must be a remarkable girl who could write so precisely on such a subject. A wonderfully cool card! and she has written just the letter that would bring any man down."

The direction on the letter was a hamlet, half town, half village, in a remote part of Gloucestershire. For reasons that will be appreciated it is better not to be too precise about name or locality.

Mr Beck sent a wire: "Down by next train, arrive two"—and went on deliberately with his substantial breakfast, pausing every now and then for another look at the letter, pulling the tangle about in his mind to loosen the knots.

"What's her little game, I wonder? Clergyman doesn't know she was sending for me. Did she want him to know? Was she afraid he'd stop her if he got the chance? He believes in the young man's innocence. She says nothing about herself. Does she want the young man cleared or hanged? Did love or spite make her send that letter? Well, I'll know that when I go down—a girl cannot keep a secret."

The railway station was a rural cottage at the end of a short branch line, which had stopped

disheartened about a mile and a half outside the village. Mr Beck left his bag at the station with the stout, good-humoured, elderly man that was a compromise between porter and stationmaster. He walked to the village through a deep lane carpeted at the borders with wild flowers, and fenced with high green walls of hawthorn sprayed with white blossoms, and alive with the chirping and flutter of birds.

A quarter of a mile from the village he passed by the girls' school, a red-tiled and narrow-windowed cottage, smothered in creepers and built on the verge of a clear, shallow stream. A murmur of fresh young voices poured out through the open window into the spring air, to mingle with the babbling of the brook and the bird-songs. A little further the ground, steeply sloping, lifted him over the red-roofed village which nestled in the valley. The pointed spar of the village church sprang up through the trees sharp and clear in the pure air. To the right the gables and turrets of a red-brick Elizabethan building showed over the billowy woods.

Mr Beck felt the tranquillising beauty of the scene keenly, though he would have found it hard to put his feelings in words.

"Rum scene for a murder," was his prosaic comment as he strode on in the direction of the church, rightly guessing he would find the vicarage in its shadow

If he doubted his welcome there the doubt was quickly removed. The vicar met him at the gate that led, through a shaven lawn dotted with lilacs, laburnum and standard rose bushes, to the vicarage—

a delightful, old-fashioned place made up chiefly of gables and bow windows.

Just for one moment a look of surprise flitted over the vicar's handsome face as he caught sight of the genial, innocent-looking visitor, so different from what he expected.

"I have the pleasure of meeting—?" He hesitated.

"Mr Beck," responded the other. "Don't look much like a detective, do I? But I'm lucky sometimes, and it's better to be lucky than clever."

The vicar shook his hand heartily.

"My dear sir, I'm charmed to meet you. I've heard of you, of course—who has not heard of Mr Beck? I was delighted when Miss Dale told me she had written to you and brought me your telegram to say you were coming down. Sad affair this, Mr Beck—so sudden and so mysterious!"

"Not much mystery," said Mr Beck, "if we are to judge by Miss Dale's account. The jury found the case clear."

"I trust you will reserve your judgment, my dear sir. You mustn't judge wholly by the bald facts; you must know the people as well; but I am forgetting my hospitality; lunch is waiting."

From the first moment he laid eyes on that handsome, intellectual face, Mr Beck knew that he had seen the vicar before. But they had passed from the soup to the cutlets in a pleasant little *tete-a-tete* luncheon before his memory found the man. Perhaps the quaint Indian trophies in the low-panelled room, grotesque idols, wrought brass and silver filigree, helped his memory.

"If I mistake not," he said, "I have the honour of lunching with the Rev. Ernest Greaves, the famous Indian missionary."

Mr Greaves was plainly pleased with the recognition, though he waved away the praise with a deprecatory white hand.

"I heard you speak in London, sir, on your return from the massacre," Mr Beck went on smoothly. "I was never so impressed with anything in my life. I had a word afterwards with the woman whose life you saved. I am honoured to meet you again, Mr Greaves, but I certainly never hoped to encounter you in a quiet Gloucestershire vicarage."

"Lord Ripondale is responsible for that," said Mr Greaves; "we will drink his health, if you don't mind; you'll find this Madeira tolerable. I have never set eyes on him to this hour, but he wrote to me to say that he 'liked a priest with pluck,' and offered me the living—eight hundred a year and a charming residence, as you see. The contrast is curious from the hourly perils of India. I have been here now for nearly two years, and there hasn't been a ripple of excitement on the current of our daily lives until this lamentable affair."

"Was it far from here the thing happened?"

"A couple of miles. If you have quite finished your lunch, Mr Beck, we might visit together the scene of the tragedy. We can talk as we walk and smoke if you care to."

Mr Beck declined the vicar's offer of a cigar. He took a stumpy briar-root pipe from his pocket and charged it with his own special mixture. The

vicar talked as they walked, and Mr Beck smoked and listened in stolid silence.

The detective noticed that the vicar walked a little lame and leant on a thick malacca cane with a curved ivory handle. "An arrow in the foot," the vicar explained, "and poisoned at that. One of the converts sucked the wound and died of the venom. The foot still aches a little at odd times, and I never stir out without a stick if I can help it."

Though the scene of the murder was only two miles from the vicarage, by the time they had got there Mr Beck knew all the vicar had to tell of the tragedy and the actors in it.

Squire Ackland, he learnt, was a middle-aged bachelor whose reputation was none of the best —a man of domineering character, with the characteristic vices and virtues of the aristocrat. He was overbearing, reckless of other people's rights or wishes, harsh to the verge of cruelty if thwarted.

On the other hand he was courageous, generous when pleased, and brutally candid. He specially prided himself on his truthfulness. "I never funked a danger or broke a promise, for good or ill," he had once boasted. But, as a rule, he was not given to boasting. He was unpopular in the neighbourhood, for he had scant regard for man's honour or woman's virtue, and he always carried a revolver, which he could use on occasion with deadly skill.

His nephew and heir, Richard Ackland, if the vicar was not prejudiced in his favour, was a vast improvement on the uncle, whom still in many ways he resembled. He, too, was of a domineering spirit,

but he was neither selfish nor cruel, and was specially chivalrous to women.

In courage and candour he rivalled his uncle. Indeed, his recklessness was a proverb. No sport attracted him that had not danger in it. He was generally known as "Dare-Devil Dick."

"A conflict between two such men," the vicar said, "was bound to be violent; for the occasion and result of that quarrel I am in some degree responsible."

"For the murder?" queried Mr Beck, imperturbably.

"Well, remotely, if we can call it a murder. I am responsible for bringing those two imperious, fiery-tempered men into violent conflict. Some months ago there was a vacancy in the position of village schoolmistress. The matter was left in my hands. I engaged a young girl whose mother I had once known. The girl was a lady by birth, but had fallen into straitened circumstances, and was glad to take the position. The fact that I happened to be vicar of the parish was, I may say, an inducement: for her mother, when dying, had commended her to my care. I had never even seen the girl at the time, but I felt for her as a father might.

"These details may seem irrelevant, Mr Beck," the vicar interrupted himself, "but you will find they have a bearing on the problem you have to solve. I will say nothing about the appearance of the young girl, Alice Dale. You will have an opportunity of judging for yourself. But I may say that, in my judgment, she is one of the sweetest and purest of women, incapable of evil. I fear I

weary you by my prosiness; I suppose it's the way with us parsons, but I will try to get to the end.

"Before the girl was a week here it chanced that both the uncle and nephew met her, and both fell desperately in love, but in a very different fashion. The nephew, headstrong and passionate as ever, wooed her like a gentleman to be his wife, but I understand—that is, I believe—got scant encouragement.

"The uncle—but I need not go into details. You will understand. It is hard to have to say harsh things of the dead, but he was a reprobate who scoffed alike at religion and at the virtue of women. Alice Dale was young and guileless; she scarcely knew his meaning when he spoke to her. But the warning instinct of virtue protected her.

"Something of his uncle's vile pursuit of the girl came, however, to the ears of the nephew. There was a stormy interview between the two. Both told me of it afterwards, and strangely enough their version was the same. The uncle made no secret of his purpose. The young man was furious with the elder, and raged and threatened to no purpose.

"'You young fool,' was the cynical, savage answer to all his protests, 'cannot you see it is to your interest I shouldn't marry! Lucky for you I don't want to. Go get a wife for yourself if you choose. I'll double your allowance; I'll treble it when you marry. But you must leave this young schoolmistress to me. You've got to stand out of my way, young man, or I'll cut you off with a

shilling. Then, if you please, ask the girl to marry you, and live together on your debts.'

"The young man turned pale—'the colour of a corpse, egad!' the uncle told me afterwards, 'and swore he would have my life if I hurt a hair of her head. Well, I don't want to hurt a hair of her head, so that's all right. I told him—eh, parson, I don't want to shock your reverence, so you had best wink the other eye if you find your schoolmistress and myself philandering.'

"Now comes the exciting part of the story."

Mr Beck's face was as inscrutable as ever.

"Yesterday as I was strolling through this wood—a favourite walk of mine—thinking out next Sunday's sermon, I came suddenly on the squire, sitting on that fallen tree yonder, smoking. I was passing with a curt 'good day,' when suddenly the thought flashed upon me what he was waiting for. Alice Dale used to pass that way every afternoon from the school to the cottage in the village where she lodged. He waited there to meet her alone. I was determined he should not have the chance.

"'By the way, squire,' I said, as politely as I could manage, 'there is a matter I want to consult you about. Your tenant, Giles Cossing, is down with fever, and I heard to-day when I called that two of his children have caught it. I understand that he is behindhand with his rent. Now I am quite sure that, knowing the circumstances, you—'

"'All right, parson,' he broke in rudely. 'Talk to me about it some other time. Confound it, man! don't you see I'm busy, and I don't want to be disturbed?'

"But I was not to be turned from my purpose. I affected to take his words as a jest.

"'Very well,' I replied lightly, 'I won't disturb you while you are so busy. It is a pleasant spot for a quiet smoke. I'll try a cigar myself, and when you have finished your business you'll let me have a word with you about Giles Cossing.'

"I found a seat at the further end of the fallen tree and lit a cigar. He growled out a curse between his teeth and glared at me like a wild beast. For a moment I thought he would strike me, but I carried this heavy stick, and I was not in the least afraid. For ten minutes we sat and smoked in silence. Then he gave in. 'Say what you've got to say quick, and go.'

"'I'm afraid it will take some time,' I said. He was quick to understand.

"'So that's the reason,' he snapped out.

"'Yes,' I replied, 'I mean to wait here till she comes, and walk with her to her lodgings.'

"'Aha, parson!' he cried with a laugh like a snarl, 'is that the way of it? Have you a sweet tooth too, like the rest of us?'

"I confess I almost lost my temper then; my grip tightened on my stick, but a missionary, Mr Beck, learns self-control.

"'She is coming,' I said, for I heard a distant step in the wood. He got up slowly and knocked the ashes from his pipe, rapping the edge viciously against the rough bark of the fallen tree. His face wore an ugly smile. I saw he had some plan in his mind—what it was I shall never know.

"A moment later I knew it was not Alice Dale's

step I heard. It was too heavy and too hasty. At the same moment I read in his eyes that the squire knew who was coming.

" Young Richard Ackland broke through the trees into the opening. He was in a furious rage, beside himself with passion, and glared at his uncle, who mocked him with a smile of utter contempt. I could see the young fellow was as mad as a dog that strains on his chain. He caught sight of me as I stood a few yards apart from the squire.

" ' I'm very glad to see you here, Mr Greaves. I want a witness to all that passes between this man and myself. He has offered the vilest insults to Miss Dale. I cannot repeat what he has said to her.'

" ' Don't worry, old chap,' chimed in the squire, ' parson knows.'

" ' And he still associates with you? '

" ' Well, I would not call it association exactly. He insisted on staying here in spite of me. He wanted to play the watch-dog to gentle Alice.'

" ' You were here lying in wait for Miss Dale? '

" ' A love tryst,' laughed the squire. ' Don't be so jealous, young man. Age before honesty— you know the proverb. Your turn may come afterwards.'

" At that Dare-Devil Dick whipped a revolver from his pocket. ' You're jesting with death,' he said. ' I mean to protect Alice Dale though it cost your life and mine. Give me your word you will never speak to her again.'

" The squire's mood changed instantly to black bitter anger.

"'Drop that foolery,' he cried harshly; 'you ought to know the man you have to deal with. Put up that pistol and get out of my sight.'

"For answer Dick levelled the revolver. I stepped between the two men. They were not five paces apart. 'Put up the pistol, Dick,' I said, 'there is nothing to be gained by violence.' I came close to him to take the weapon from his hand.

"Under his breath he said: 'It is not loaded,' and louder, that the squire might hear, he ordered me to stand aside.

"I was fool enough to appeal to the squire. 'Let the girl alone,' I said, 'she is very young and innocent. Let her be.'

"He flamed into sudden anger. 'You whining sneak,' he cried, 'I believe you want the girl for yourself,' and he struck me with his open hand across the face.

"Dick spoke again. 'Your answer,' he shouted. 'Promise never to see the girl again, or take the consequences.'

"'You young fool,' growled the squire, fiercely, 'do you think I'm to be frightened by these schoolboy tricks!'

"Crack!

"The revolver shot rang out sharp and harsh through the silent woods. The squire clapped his hand to his side, reeled a little like a drunkard that tries to keep his balance, and fell. I had barely time to drop my stick, catch him in my arms, and so let him slide down to the sward, where he lay prone and still.

"Dick Ackland, with the revolver, from which

curled a ringlet of smoke, dangling loosely by his side, stood gazing with wild eyes—a very statue of bewilderment.

" ' But the pistol was not loaded,' he muttered, speaking, it would seem, to himself more than to me; ' I took the bullet from the cartridge myself.'

" ' It may be a fit of some kind,' I answered.

" ' I will fetch a doctor.'

" Before he could move a foot there was a glimmer of colour on the shady path, and Alice Dale appeared. She stood still, her eyes questioning us; they seemed to search our hearts. When you have seen her you will understand.

" ' I fear he is dead,' groaned poor Dick, constrained to answer her questioning eyes.

" ' And you? '

" Then she saw the revolver lying in his hand and guessed. She gasped like one hurt to death. All the colour ebbed swiftly from her face; she swayed and fell forward in a dead faint, yet not so suddenly but Dick caught her in his arms.

" ' Look to her, Dick,' I said. ' It is only a faint—the sudden shock; a little water from the brook will revive her. I will bring Dr Hampden. There is a short cut through the woods.'

" I don't think, Mr Beck, lame man ever covered rough ground quicker. I had to climb the demesne wall at the end of my run. You shall see the path presently if you care to."

" I would like to see the young lady first," said Mr Beck.

He had been poking about in the short, mossy turf like a golfer in search of a lost ball. It was an

instinct of Mr Beck's to poke about. The gleam of bright metal caught his eye. He picked up something and held it out for inspection to the vicar, who eyed it curiously.

"It looks like the lid of a small brass box," the vicar said tentatively.

It *was* like the lid of a very small circular brass box, of less diameter than a farthing, but much thicker, and fitted with a screw.

Mr Beck held it in the palm of his broad hand, turning it over and over inquisitively with a strong, thick forefinger, as if he questioned its use.

"I never saw a box so small," he said, "except a pasteboard pill-box. I wonder who had it here, and for what purpose?"

The question was addressed rather to himself than to the vicar. Anyway, the vicar made no answer.

Mr Beck dropped the little disc of brass into his waistcoat pocket.

"Shall we call on the young lady now," he said briskly, "and find what she has to say for herself?"

"She is at the school," answered the vicar. "She insisted on going on with her work, though she is terribly cut up by this tragedy, poor child!"

"Naturally," said Mr Beck. "Let us go to the school and see the young lady."

The walk led them through shady woodland ways to the school which Mr Beck had seen in the morning hard by the banks of a clear, swift-flowing stream. The birds piped in the overhanging boughs, the sunbeams danced on the ripples of the stream and made a shifting network of gold on the sandy bottom. There was a grim incongruity between the peaceful

rural scene and the tragedy they had come to investigate.

" If you will wait here," said the vicar, " I will call the girl to you. She can give the school in charge of her assistant for a few minutes."

Presently she came towards him where he stood at the fringe of the wood, a slim, girlish figure, bare-headed, and clad in a close-fitting black gown, with white at the neck and wrists. The sun was in her eyes, and she walked with downcast lids.

Mr Beck was surprised. It was the face of a schoolgirl, pretty, with the commonplace prettiness of soft brown hair and pink and white complexion; not in the least the girl he had expected to see; not in the least the girl he would have thought likely to kindle the flame of hot passion in the hearts of two such headstrong men as the vicar had described.

" This is Mr Beck," the vicar said, and she looked him straight in the eyes.

Then he understood. This was no ordinary woman. Never in his life had he seen such wonderful, such beautiful eyes. The colour was the pure, deep blue of the violet; the light was clear and bright as the sapphire. But violet or sapphire is trite, meaningless comparison. It was not the colour nor the light that made her eyes so wonderful. It was the life, the thought, the soul of a woman that shone through from their clear depths. Even the stolid Mr Beck lost his self-possession under her gaze.

The girl spoke first.

" It was very good of you to come," she said. " I hope you may be able to help the innocent. Richard Ackland is quite innocent."

"How do you know that?" Mr Beck asked.

Her eyes answered before she spoke.

"He told me so. Of course, I knew before he told me, but I was glad to have his word."

"Well," said Mr Beck, "we'll assume his innocence. That's all right for us, but, you see, we have got to prove it to others. I'll find that task easier when I know all the facts."

"Where shall I begin?"

"As near the beginning as you can, Miss Dale."

"A little while after I came here the elder Mr Ackland said things to me which—" the fair cheeks flushed, and the colour darkened in those wonderful blue eyes with anger or pain.

Mr Beck saw her trouble and briskly interposed: "Never mind about him—tell me about the younger man."

"Later," she said simply, "Richard asked me to be his wife. I refused him. I feared it would make trouble. But to-day, when I saw him in the police-station for a moment, I promised."

"If," began the vicar, fumblingly.

She caught his meaning in an instant.

"If he wins through this horrible trouble," she said quietly; "if not, I shall never marry."

All this was said very quietly, in a sweet, even voice. Only the girl's frank eyes told how intense was the pain she suffered.

"I don't want to worry you more than I can help," said Mr Beck, compassionately; "just a word as to what happened yesterday. You fainted, I believe, Miss Dale."

"Only for a second; I recovered instantly."

"You thought at first that Mr Richard Ackland had shot his uncle."

Hot anger kindled in the blue eyes.

"Never, never for a moment. How dare you say so! I was frightened, that was all. I saw a man lie bleeding—a wicked man, a man I hated, I won't deny it. But I was shocked all the same and wanted to save him. I had studied nursing before I came here and I thought he was still alive. I tried to bind up his wound; it looked no more than a pin prick, with one or two drops of blood oozing from it. I sent Mr Richard Ackland to fetch water. In the squire's coat pocket I found a revolver. I must have accidentally meddled with the trigger some way, for the thing went off."

"I forgot to say I heard the report when I was just climbing the demesne wall," said the vicar.

"The noise," the girl went on, "brought Richard running back to me. The squire was then quite dead, and we stayed together till the doctor came back with Mr Greaves. A short time afterwards the police appeared. That is all I know. Can you save him?" The blue eyes were full of a piteous entreaty.

"I hope so," Mr Beck answered a little huskily. Beauty in distress always moved him.

With a queer little, old-fashioned curtsey to the vicar and to the detective, but without a word more to either, the girl went back across the sunlit sward to her school.

"If you are not tired," said Mr Beck, "I would like to have a word with the police."

"I'm never tired," the vicar answered, "when

there is work to be done; and the police-station is only a quarter of a mile away."

Sergeant Coleman knew Mr Beck by name and reputation. He had a brother, he said, who had been in a case with Mr Beck, and he was as proud of it as Lord Dundreary was of the brother who played the German flute. He regarded the detective with the profound veneration of the small boy for the head of the school.

Mr Beck took the good man's manifest worship with modest unconcern. The corpse lay in the guard-room. A hard, handsome face—the face of one of the wicked old Roman Emperors carved in grey marble.

In another room the nephew, Richard Ackland, was held for the murder. Mr Beck managed to get an unobserved peep through the window. The young fellow sat bolt upright, with eyes half closed and the handsome face rigid.

"Looks like a caged hawk," was Mr Beck's comment as he moved away. "Always try to know what they look like, sergeant, before you jump to conclusions. It helps, believe me, it helps."

Mr Beck was very keen in his scrutiny of the two revolvers. Both were six-chambered. The one which was said to belong to the dead squire had four chambers loaded with ball cartridge. The nephew's weapon was loaded in five chambers, but the five bullets had been carefully extracted from the cartridges.

"You'll be wanting to see this, sir," said the sergeant. "It was that bit of lead that did the job." He handed him a little flattened fragment of lead.

"Must have gone clean through," the sergeant explained. "It fell out of his waistcoat when we undressed him."

Mr Beck took it in the palm of his broad hand.

"Got a scales, sergeant? A letter-scales will do." He weighed it to a hair. "Keep that carefully," he said, as he handed it back. "It will be useful at the trial."

"Have you found a clue, Mr Beck?" the vicar asked, as they strolled back to the vicarage.

"Too many, I'm afraid," said Mr Beck, dejectedly. "The case is getting confoundedly plain."

In the vicarage there was a revolver hanging to a nail in the hall.

"Loaded?" asked Mr Beck, pointing to the weapon.

"No," the vicar answered; "merely a scarecrow. It is half a year since I fired a shot out of it. It was a gift from young Richard Ackland."

Mr Beck took the pistol from the wall and examined it.

"It is one of a pair," he said; "the same maker and calibre, and takes the same cartridge. Could you get me a bullet of this pistol, Mr Greaves? I should like to weigh it."

For a moment the vicar looked startled and confused. He must have realised how deadly it would prove for Richard Ackland if the bullet of the pistol proved the same weight as the lead that killed the squire.

Mr Beck saw his hesitation—possibly he guessed the cause.

"The truth is the truth, anyway, and it must out," he said, "whoever brings it out."

" I will get you the bullet," said the vicar, and left the room.

In a moment or two he returned with a bullet between his fingers. Mr Beck weighed it carefully. It was the same weight as the morsel of lead he had weighed at the police-station.

" I'm afraid that settles it," muttered the detective; " the case has grown quite clear."

" I hope not, I sincerely hope not," cried the vicar.

" Well, we must all hope for the best," said Mr Beck, " but it is hard to hope strongly against strong proof."

He refused the vicar's pressing invitation to put up at the vicarage.

" There is a comfortable public-house, the sergeant tells me, in the village. My mind, such as it is, works best when I'm roughing it. Good-evening, sir. I hope to call to see you early to-morrow with some news."

Early next morning Mr Beck was on the scene of the murder—not the stolid Mr Beck of the day before, but active, eager, every sense keenly alert.

There was a curious suggestion about him of a well-trained setter dog when it is close upon the game —every nerve and muscle vibrant with suppressed excitement.

Like a setter he beat round the spot, searching the ground with his eyes. There had been much rain of late, and the ground was still soft enough to take and hold footprints. He found three or four prints, small and sharp, of the heel of a girl's shoe. He could even trace where Dick Ackland's foot had slipped and torn

the sod as he stopped and turned on his way to the brook when he heard the second revolver shot.

The vicar's footprints were faint and hard to follow (the lame foot lighter than the other) as he ran for the doctor. At first Mr Beck could only find a mere trace at intervals through the grass, but after a bit he reached the bottom of stiff clay that took the mould of the footprints like plaster of Paris.

Then suddenly he came upon something that surprised him. It was a slight protuberance in the clay, shaped somewhat like a button mushroom, a foot or so distant from the vicar's footprint.

Mr Beck dropped on his knees and whipped out the magnifying glass he always carried. He could just distinguish a faint, spiral line on the surface of the tiny thimble of clay.

Fumbling in his waistcoat pocket he got out the little brass lid he had found at the scene of the murder. It fitted the clay mushroom like a glove.

"I thought so," Mr Beck muttered, as he slipped the little brass lid back into his pocket; "that makes it quite certain." He followed the track carefully. The little round knob showed at intervals beside the footprints. Then it ceased.

Mr Beck's keen glance searched the ground on either side. To the right the woods opened to a clearing; to the left there was a sandy rabbit-warren rising in stunted hillocks. In front, not a hundred yards off, was the wall of the demesne. He had no trouble in satisfying himself that someone had recently scrambled over the wall—a stiff scramble for a lame man. The mortar had been stripped in several places by clinging feet and hands.

A moment's inspection satisfied Mr Beck there was no more to be learnt there. He followed the track no further, but went back to the rabbit-warren. Here on the dry, shifting sand the traces of recent feet were so slight as to be imperceptible to any eyes less keen than his own.

He poked about curiously amongst the burrows as if he were rabbit hunting, not crime hunting, and he even stretched his arm to the shoulder into two or three tortuous holes.

At last, apparently, he found what he sought in a rabbit hole near the top of a sandy hillock. Then he sat down, lit his pipe, and waited placidly.

The blue smoke curled softly up through the still air, the birds woke to song, and the peaceful rural scene, with its clumps of trees and wide stretches of lawn, and silver gleam of water in the distance, grew lovelier in the glowing sunlight, and still Mr Beck smoked and waited.

At last he caught sight of the unmistakable figure of the vicar limping swiftly over the ground, with his inevitable walking-cane in his hand.

Almost at the same moment the vicar caught sight of him as he sat conspicuous on the hillock, paused for the fraction of a second and then came on quickly as before.

"Good-morning, Mr Beck," he said genially, as he took a seat beside him. "You are very early abroad. Is it business or pleasure?"

"Both," said Mr Beck; "it is a lovely morning to get an appetite for breakfast."

"Have you come to the rabbits for counsel?"

queried the vicar, smilingly. "Found any clues in the rabbit holes?"

"Well, yes," answered Mr Beck, stolidly. "I found the last clue there, but I knew pretty well what I should find before I found it."

The vicar's face hardened for a second, as with a sudden spasm of pain or fear. But his voice was easy and careless as he said: "Tell me all about it. You know I'm deeply interested."

"I know that," said Mr Beck, simply. "It's a very interesting case." He took the little brass lid from his pocket. "It puzzled me a bit at first," he said, "though I ought to have guessed. This morning I found out what it is."

"And what is it?" asked the vicar.

"The ferrule of an air-gun," answered Mr Beck, gravely, and again the vicar's face hardened with pain or fear.

"Of course," Mr Beck went on, "I knew that it was not his nephew who shot the squire."

"How did you know it—when did you know it?"

"When I weighed the bit of lead that killed him. I knew the weight of the bullet that pattern of revolver would carry. It is my business to know. It was not the bullet of that revolver which killed the squire. When you brought me a bullet of the same weight as the lead and told me it was the bullet of your revolver you gave the show away. Then the idea of an air-gun flashed upon me, and I came out this morning to make sure."

"Well?" The word came with a kind of gasp from the vicar. "Did you make sure?"

Mr Beck answered slowly: "I made quite sure.

You see," he went on, "a man using the air-gun as a walking-cane with the ferrule off would leave little knobs on the clay. I found those little knobs and the little brass cap fitted them."

The vicar only nodded, but there was no fear in his face now.

"Vicar," said Mr Beck, with grave concern in his deep voice—almost with compassion—"you had your cane in your hand when you started to run for the doctor. You could not climb that wall with your cane in your hand and yet it found its way back to the vicarage. You can guess what that told me."

"There were two identical canes," said the vicar.

"And one of the two was an air-gun. It only remained to find out where you had hidden the air-gun before you climbed the wall. That was an easy task."

Mr Beck stooped over a rabbit hole beside him and drew out a walking-cane, in appearance identical with that which lay on the grass beside the vicar. But the second was of steel, and there was a little hole where the ferrule should have been.

The vicar never flinched. They were right who praised the courage of the man. His eyes were steady; there was no tremor in his voice.

"I'm glad I shot the brute," he said, "and I'm half glad you found me out; but I hope you will believe I had no notion of letting Dick Ackland suffer for it. As a last resource I would have surrendered. Still, I hoped to get him out of the country, and so give me a chance with Alice Dale, for I love Alice Dale."

'Mr. Beck stopped over a rabbit hole and drew out a walking-cane.''

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The words were very quietly spoken, but the man's whole soul was in them. His voice shook with hopeless passion.

"I love Alice Dale," he repeated. "Now you will understand why I killed the scoundrel who insulted her. Perhaps you will even understand why I hoped that if young Ackland were out of the country I might have had a chance.

"The air-gun," he went on quietly, "was a gift of a dear friend when I was going to India. It is wonderfully powerful, and fires half a dozen bullets to a single pumping. I found it very useful more than once in India. The duplicate cane I bought in London when I returned, because it was so like the air-gun. I could hardly tell them apart, except by the weight. I had put the air-gun aside. No one in the vicarage knew anything of it.

"But I took it out of its hiding-place and carried it constantly since I heard of Squire Ackland's insult to Alice Dale. I had it with me loaded when I met him in the wood, and I quietly screwed off the ferrule, which slipped from my fingers into the thick grass. I almost hoped he would give me a chance to use the gun in self-defence. When Dick Ackland fired the blank cartridge I saw my chance and took it. I was standing close to the squire at the time. I turned the point of the air-gun to his side, pressed the little knob with my thumb, like this:—"

With a quick movement he snatched the air-gun from where it lay across the detective's knees, and turned the nozzle to his side. There was a sharp, metallic twang as the release of the tightly-packed

air drove the bullet home. The man toppled over, and the gun went clattering down the hillock.

The spasm of the parting soul distorted the vicar's face with sudden agony. Then a smile settled on the dead face, and he lay limp and still, staring with sightless eyes at the blue sky. Human justice had no further claim on him.

III

DROWNED DIAMONDS

Mr Paul Beck went to Eagleton on business. He stayed for pleasure.

He was sent down to secure evidence against a young bank clerk suspected of serious defalcations. The result of his investigations was to send to penal servitude a highly-respectable bank manager who had ingeniously endeavoured to shift his own guilt on to the shoulders of a subordinate.

The amount at stake was very large and the fee substantial. The job had only taken four days, and Mr Beck, who had nothing pressing on his hands, stayed on at the Rockwell Hotel, Eagleton. The place has so recently and so suddenly grown into public favour that it is hardly necessary to mention that Eagleton has been always one of the most beautiful, as it is now one of the most popular, watering-places in the three kingdoms. The town stands on a gentle slope, backed by a circle of high hills and fronted by a beautiful bay.

Doubtless the building of Rockwell Hotel largely helped to make Eagleton fashionable. At one corner of the bay a broad flat tableland, level as a billiard-table, runs out into the water. A foot under the soil is solid rock which meets the

sea in a sheer wall fifty feet high. Of this wall twenty feet are over the water, and thirty feet under it.

Right at the edge the great hotel is built. The terrace at the back of the hotel looks not merely over the sea, but down into it. The boats are moored under the hotel windows, and spring-boards for bathers strike out from the railings of the terrace. It reminds one of Venice, with this difference, that instead of a dark, muddy canal there is a wide expanse of clear, blue water hedged in by the everlasting hills. No wonder the Rockwell Hotel made Eagleton popular.

Yet it was not the beauties of Nature—at least the inanimate beauties—that kept Mr Beck in the place after his work was over.

No doubt it suited him. There was a fine golf links at the further end of the town where the land begins to slope up from the sea. The sea-fishing was excellent, and Mr Beck, as we know, loved fishing of all kinds. A tiny motor launch—light and swift as a bird—whisked him over the bay to the spot, near or far, where fish were plentiful and hungry. These were potent inducements, no doubt, but there was still " metal more attractive."

The main inducement that held him in Eagleton was the charming companionship of Miss Alice Rosedale, the American heiress, who was staying with her father, Joshua Rosedale, at the Rockwell Hotel. Mr Beck liked girls—especially when they were so young and pretty as Miss Alice Rosedale. This stout, middle-aged detective was as devoted to the service of the sex as a knight-errant of old,

and as ready when the chance offered to do them a service.

Let it be said the feeling was reciprocal. All the girls were fond of Mr Beck and treated him with an affectionate freedom and familiarity that made the young men grind their teeth with envy.

Miss Alice Rosedale publicly declared she was in love with him, and she was ready at any time to throw over any of her young admirers for a round of golf with Mr Beck, or a run over the bay in his motor-boat.

Yet, strange to say, her two chief admirers, though hating each other cordially, were both the very best friends with Mr Beck; moreover, her father had taken a special fancy to the good-humoured, good-natured detective.

"May I come?" he said one morning as Mr Beck went down the iron ladder from the hotel terrace to his motor-boat. "There is something particular I want to say to you."

"Of course," said Mr Beck, as he slipped the rope from the ring.

Mr Rosedale sat in the stern, smoking a huge cigar, while the boat slid out over the still blue waters of the bay—swift, smooth and noiseless as a skater on ice.

Plainly Mr Rosedale had a difficulty about that something particular he wanted to say to Mr Beck.

He began awkwardly enough at last. "It is only this morning," he said, "I heard you were the detective who got the young fellow out of his trouble and brought the real criminal to book. All the town was talking about the business, but no one knew you

had a hand in it. I saw the new bank manager yesterday. I had a pretty big lodgment to make, and he told me the whole story in confidence. 'Gad! it was the smartest thing I ever heard."

There was no false modesty about Mr Beck. He beamed at the other's praise.

"Luck helped me as usual," he said, "but you'll keep the story to yourself—won't you? I'm having a real good time down here, which might be spoilt if people knew who I was."

"Oh, that's all right! I'm close as a clam. But I thought, perhaps, you might do me a trick of your trade while you are here. Now keep your hair on, at anyrate till you've heard what I've got to say. I'm a rough sort of chap, and I've made my own pile. I've been in everything but gold mines, and I haven't missed that much, for pretty near everything I touched turned to gold. Live meat, dead meat, wheat and oil—I've had a go at everything that had a dollar in it, and I've nearly always been lucky enough to get in on the ground floor and come out at the top."

"There's nothing like luck," Mr Beck agreed sententiously.

"Well, my biggest bit of luck is Alice."

"That's so," assented Mr Beck, with emphasis.

"Alice gets what she wants," said her father.

"So I should imagine."

"Have you seen her necklace? No! Well, I'll get her to wear it to-night. I tell you it's fine. The middle diamond I picked up from a Kaffir at the Cape. I didn't ask where he found it. I've made many a good bargain in my day, but that was

about the best. There's close on half a million dollars squeezed tight in that bit of glass. The other stones aren't bad—the smallest cost more than the big one. You can't match that necklace in America, and you can't match the girl in the world. Now I want you to keep an eye on both for me. See! "

Mr Beck was jointing his rod, and they were near the centre of the bay—sea, lake or river, he always fished with a rod.

" From what I have seen of Miss Alice," he said, " she is pretty well able to take care of her necklace and of herself."

" She's spry—that's so, she's spry, but girls and jewels tempt thieves. There have been three tries for the necklace, and it was nearly gone once. You know Jim Morgan? "

" He's no thief," interposed Mr Beck, bluntly. " He's a man if I know a man."

" In a way you're right—in a way you're wrong. He doesn't want the diamonds, but he's got a hankering after my girl. He'd steal her if he got half a chance."

" I don't blame him."

" Nor I, but I'll stop him. Jim is right enough. His father and I were pards once. Jim has made his pile on a cattle ranch. He can shoot and ride some, and he is very welcome to any girl in America except mine."

" And why not yours? "

Mr Beck had hooked a heavy fish and was playing him on his light rod while he listened and answered. The struggling, splashing fish and the imperturbable angler were curiously suggestive of the man's method.

"Why not yours?" he repeated, winding up his line, for Mr Rosedale had come to a halt.

"Well, it's this way," he blundered out at last shamefacedly, "Jim is a good chap. I'm not denying it—and he and Alice ran together when they were children. But I promised my old woman when she was leaving that I'd marry the girl to a lord, and I don't want to go back on my word. She's good enough for any lord."

"Too good."

"Well, a lord it is to be. I'd sooner have a French lord than a Britisher. Britishers are getting too common. What do you think of the Count Victor D'Armaund? He's spry!"

"Very spry," Mr Beck assented drily, as he brought the meek, exhausted fish to the boat's edge, and with a dexterous dip of the gaff flicked him on board.

"He's got five chateaux and a forest in France," said the millionaire; "he told me so, and his title comes down from the Crusaders. Of course I took his word for it, but business is business, and I've sent a man special to France to make sure. Alice seems to cotton to him; if the title, etc., are O.K., he might do."

"Yes," assented Mr Beck, drily as before, "he might—do." The last word came out by itself as he unhooked his fish, and with a quick jerk of his wrist swished the shiny bait back into the sea.

"But where do I come in?" he asked mildly, when Mr Rosedale again came to a halt.

"Well, I thought you might just keep a look round promiscuous-like, in case anything should

happen. As to fee, just name it. I'll write the cheque when we go back; you put the figure in yourself."

Mr Beck took him up short. "Let us leave the cheque-book out of the question," he said. "I'm here for amusement, not money. I'm a rich man too, Mr Rosedale, I may say a very rich man. I have been lucky enough to be of service to people who have lots of money, people like yourself who were rich and over-generous, and they have given me a fair share of the spoil. I have made my own hits on the Stock Exchange as well. I've more money than I shall ever know what to do with."

"Then why—?" Mr Rosedale began.

"Why am I a detective you want to know? Because I like the work. Why does a dog set game? Instinct, I suppose. But it isn't altogether instinct with me. I have managed to help at least as many as I have hurt, and as I help the good and hurt the bad I feel I am a kind of Providence in a small way of business. Miss Alice and I are very good friends, and I should be glad, if you like, to keep an eye on her and her diamonds."

"Shake!" said Mr Rosedale. "I'll take you at your word. It's a load off my mind to know you are hanging round."

That evening there was a dance at the hotel, and Mr Beck, with his back to the wall, looked on benevolently while Miss Alice danced with the French count. A handsome man was the Count—tall and graceful, and swarthy, even for a Frenchman, with an abundant crop of shiny black hair, curly and silky as a water spaniel's. Strangely enough his eyes were

steel blue, and gave a special character to his otherwise somewhat commonplace good looks. Most men looked twice at Count Victor D'Armaund, and most women oftener, to the danger of their peace of mind.

He " waltzed divinely," and the eyes of Miss Alice, as they swung and whirled to the languorous strain of the music, beamed with the girl's delight in a jolly dance and a perfect partner. Her dress was of fluffy silk, with a pretty rosebud pattern, and round her slim, white throat were the diamonds. It was a collar of gems rather than a necklace, with the famous Rosedale diamond blazing in the centre under the pert dimple of her chin.

She caught sight of Mr Beck by the wall, and flung him a saucy smile as she swept past. But there was no smile for the young fellow who stood beside Mr Beck—Yankee writ plain in his tall, lank, strong figure and keen face with deep-set eyes that glowered at the Count.

" Pop told me you wanted to see the diamonds," Alice said as she walked past after the dance, leaning lightly on her partner's arm. " Catch! "

She undid the collar of diamonds from her neck and tossed it—a flash of white light under the electric lamps—to Mr Beck.

He caught it lightly in a big, brown hand, and followed her to the door of the ballroom.

" I will sit out the next dance after supper with you," said Miss Alice, generously. " Pop tells me you are a judge of diamonds. I want to know what you think of mine."

Mr Beck got to a quiet corner under a lamp and

peered closely at the jewels that lay—a little pool of limpid light—in his hollow palm, while his practised eyes appraised their value. The huge Rosedale diamond seemed to hold a fire imprisoned in its heart which broke forth in streams of coloured sparks through every facet.

"I wonder what your history will be," he said gravely, "when you are a hundred years over ground. Will you have the same grim story as the other big diamonds to tell of trickery, cheating, robbery and murder? Mr Rosedale is right; these gems will take some looking after. Well, I'll do my best while I'm here — I can do no more."

Miss Alice found him in his quiet corner, his eyes still on the gems.

"Ours, I think," she said, with a demure little curtsey, and with her hand on his arm stepped daintily across the room to the passage that led to the terrace by the sea.

"We will be quite comfy here," she said, as she nestled down amid a pile of silk cushions in a big wicker chair. "I sent Jim for the cushions," she added wickedly; "he doesn't mind you. But when I told him at first I was going to sit out with the Count he gave me a look like a bowie-knife."

"Why do you worry him?" asked Mr Beck.

"What do you think of my big diamond?" replied Miss Alice.

"It's one of the finest I have ever seen. I believe it is one of the twelve best in the world."

She clapped her hands in childish glee.

"I'm so glad! I couldn't quite trust Pop; he so cracks up all that belongs to himself, daughter included. You're sure?"

"Quite."

"Well, you shall put it on for telling me. There!"

With big, strong fingers, that were wonderfully light in their touch, Mr Beck fastened the glittering collar round the fair neck, and the thought came to him that Mr Rosedale was right again—the daughter, too, would take some watching.

She was bewitchingly lovely in the moonlight, with that magic circle of coloured light at her white throat. Dainty and fragile she looked as a figure of Dresden china, but he knew what a wonderful reserve of strength was in that slight, girlish figure, where every muscle was of fine steel. He knew, too, that the dainty little lady had a mind and a will of her own.

"Now what about these two men?" said Mr Beck, coming, with quiet persistence, back to the topic she had evaded.

"I do my best," she said, with an unctuous upturning of the bright brown eyes, brimful and running over with mischievous light. "I divide my time fairly between the two. I row and swim with Jim, and I play tennis and dance with the Count. The Count doesn't swim or row, and Jim doesn't play tennis or dance, so it's a sort of fair divide. I'm sure neither of them grudges you your golf."

"My good little girl," said Mr Beck, "you don't want me to tell you that you can only make one man

in the world happy, though you can make as many as you choose miserable? You cannot marry both Jim and the Count—not in this country, anyway."

She bubbled over with delicious laughter.

"Oh, you dear old Mrs Grundy! I see dad has been talking to you of the daughter as well as of the diamonds. He wants me to throw Jim over and marry the Count. Now doesn't he?"

Mr Beck nodded.

"Can you keep a secret?"

He nodded again.

"Well, I can't marry the Count because he's married already, and two wives are no more allowed than two husbands in this country. The Count told me himself the very first day. Perhaps he was afraid I'd fall in love with him and break my innocent little heart. Anyway he told me, and I begged him not to tell anyone else. That's where the fun comes in, you see. Pop is delighted and Jim is distracted, and I have my amusement for nothing."

"And when you are tired of your sport?" ventured Mr Beck.

"When I am I'll tell you, but that's not yet. Now take me back. I have promised the next waltz to the Count, and I just love to see Jim glowering."

She told the Count what Mr Beck had said about the diamonds, and the Count was much impressed. It seems that he also had some knowledge of precious stones.

"But you can never judge fairly by artificial

light," he said; "it needs clear daylight to make sure."

"I will bring them down with me to breakfast to-morrow," interposed Alice—"I will be breakfasting at eleven. And you?"

"The same hour," gravely responded the Count.

"What a curious coincidence," said the girl, innocently. "Then we shall meet at breakfast most likely."

Later in the night the girl and the Count had paused by the open window, after a long waltz which they had danced through from the first note to the last. The room was hot and the crowd great. Alice Rosedale was cool, fresh and dainty as a newly-plucked flower. Nothing tired her—nothing heated her. But the Count breathed quickly, and was flushed with exercise, and his gloves clung to his fingers as he took them off slowly.

"Tired out, Count?" said the smiling Mr Beck, pausing on his way to the door.

The Frenchman put the suggestion aside with a scornful little shrug.

"One is never tired in heaven," he said with his quaint French accent.

"I suppose I'm getting too old for heaven," Mr Beck rejoined placidly. "Good-night, Miss Rosedale; good-night, Count."

Contrary to custom, he shook the Count heartily by the hand as they parted.

When he got to his own room Mr Beck noticed several faint, greyish stains on the pure, smooth white of his right-hand glove. He examined them

with a magnifying-glass, and then put the glove carefully aside.

The Count and Miss Rosedale met as she had prophesied at breakfast in the open air on the terrace looking over the tranquil sea just touched into sparkling ripples by the morning breeze.

A dainty breakfast tempted appetites that needed no tempting, and the beautiful surroundings heightened their enjoyment of the meal.

"May I have the felicity?" the Count asked, when they moved to a broad bench closer to the sea. He held his gold cigarette-case open.

It was characteristic of the man and his gallantry that the cigarettes had a faint odour of violets. They were specially designed for ladies' smoking.

The girl nestled more cosily amongst her cushions and looked out over the glorious view. The broad floor of blue water was circled by a range of hills whose peaks and curves stood in sharp outline against the sky. A fresh breeze was on the wing, and little waves, white-edged with foam, raced shorewards.

A white-sailed yacht a hundred yards from where they sat gave brightness and life to the picture. The crew were busy aboard, apparently hoisting sail and weighing anchor for a cruise.

To the right Mr Beck in his motor-boat was moving slowly with a fishing-rod arched over the bow and a line trailing through the sparkling water.

A softer light dawned in the girl's eyes as she looked out over the sea, wholly oblivious of the handsome Frenchman at her side.

"You have forgotten the diamonds," he said tentatively; "is it not so? Young ladies forget—yes."

She woke up suddenly at the sound of his smooth voice.

"Wrong," she said sharply; "women never forget when they want to remember. I have brought you the diamonds."

She drew the case from a flimsy little bag of brocaded silk where she kept her handkerchief and purse, and handed it to him carelessly.

He took it as carelessly, but she noticed at the time that his hand trembled as he took it and his face paled. Perhaps he had some presentiment of what was to follow.

When he opened the case a cry of delight escaped him. The diamonds were one blaze of dazzling, many-coloured light in the sunshine. The Count examined them carefully. "They are priceless!" he murmured. "Priceless! Matchless! May I be permitted? In your dark hair they would superbly show."

But as he took a hasty step forward to where she sat his foot caught in the edge of the rug and a stumble shot him against the railing that, waist high, guarded the terrace. His feet went up and his head down as he struck, and he was flung in an awkward heap over the railing into the sea. The diamonds left his hand as he fell and shot in front—a curved streak of light.

A frightened scream broke from the girl's lips. She was on her feet in a moment, at the edge of the terrace, with eager eyes on the tossing water. Like a

"The diamonds left his hand as he fell, and shot in front—a curved streak of light."

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flash she remembered that the Count could not swim, and she stood ready to plunge to his rescue the moment he showed above the surface.

But he never showed. He went down like a stone, and the water closed on him unbroken.

While the girl stood poised like a statue of a diver at the terrace edge, Mr Beck, who had heard the scream and seen the splash, turned his motor-boat sharply towards the terrace, and as it shot by plunged for the spot where the Count had disappeared. The frightened girl thought he, too, was lost, so long he remained beneath the water, but at last his head broke the surface at least twenty yards further out to sea than where he went in. He came up empty-handed, and turned and swam straight for the motor-boat which had drifted in close to the terrace.

Meanwhile the crew of the yacht who had a full view of the accident dropped the sails they were hauling and rushed to the side excitedly. Two of them clambered into the punt that dangled at the stern, and rowed slowly backwards and forwards over the hundred yards' space of water that lay between the terrace and the yacht, with eyes close to the surface searching the depths.

It was all in vain. All in vain, too, a little later, a swarm of volunteers composed of expert swimmers and divers from the hotel, explored the water in all directions. There was no current in the place. The water, though deep, was very clear and free from wind, and the bottom of smooth, firm sand. The disappearance of the unfortunate

Frenchman and the diamonds was a bewildering mystery.

Mr Rosedale rampaged over the place, now offering fabulous rewards for the recovery of the man or the diamonds; now shouting directions to Jim Morgan, who headed the splashing search party in the bay, and who was as much under the water as over it.

All this time the girl sat apart, silent and very pale. She showed no interest in the search. The man was drowned—nothing else mattered in the least. The horror of it stunned her. The passage from life to death had been so sudden—one moment smiling beside her, gay, handsome, full of life and spirit; the next dead.

What did it matter whether they found the corpse or the diamonds? The man himself whom she had laughed with and played with was gone out of the world. Sitting there in the sunshine, with the beautiful world around her, her warm heart was chilled with the horror of death. It had come so close that she could never again hope to escape from the grim shadow of that remembrance.

Her listless eyes chanced to light on the figure of Mr Beck, and in some vague way she was cheered at the sight of him. That sedate, comfortable, commonplace figure made horror seem unreal. After his first impetuous plunge into the water Mr Beck seemed to take no further part or interest in the performance. He had changed his clothes, had taken a solid, solitary lunch, and now sat comfortably in the stern of

the motor-boat watching the animated scene in the water.

The quest was at last abandoned in despair.

The white-sailed yacht meanwhile had gathered up its crew and put out to sea. Jim Morgan, his search over, was lounging disconsolately on the terrace when Mr Beck beckoned to him from the motor-boat.

"Well?" said Mr Beck.

"It isn't well—it's confoundedly unwell."

"Keep cool, young man."

"You might as well tell the devil to keep cool on his gridiron. I shouldn't mind the old chap cursing and growling, but the girl's face takes the life out of me. When I spoke to her just now she didn't answer, but she stared at me as if I had murdered that Frenchman. I never cared for him overmuch, I admit, but I was sorry he went under. I'd have saved him if I could. Where did he go to, anyway? He's not in the water I'll swear."

"Nor on the land," added Mr Beck.

"Of course not; I saw him go down."

"And didn't see him come up. So he's drowned of course, isn't he?"

There was a curious tone in his voice as he put the question that made the young American look up suddenly. Mr Beck caught his eye and winked.

"What the mischief are you driving at now?"

"Will you come for a short trip with me in the motor-boat?"

"Why?"

"I'll tell you and show you."

"Let her rip then; I'm just aching to know what's up."

Mr Beck turned the electric switch and started the engine. The bay was empty of pleasure boats, only far out in the offing gleamed the white sails of a yacht heading straight for the open sea.

"Now," said Jim Morgan, "you've got to tell me where are the man and the diamonds, if they are not at the bottom of the sea."

"There!" said Mr Beck, laconically, and he pointed a thick forefinger at the white-sailed vessel that seemed to come slowly back to them across the broad blue expanse of the bay.

"But how in creation," stammered the American, "did he get there?"

"Dived from the terrace to the boat."

"Not to be done," retorted the other, sharply; "the Count cannot swim a stroke. The boat was a good hundred yards off when he went down. The man doesn't live that could dive the distance."

"That depends on circumstances," answered Mr Beck, placidly as ever; "a tow-line was one of the circumstances. I might have guessed if I didn't see, but as it happened I did see. My blundering good luck helped me as usual.

"When I jumped overboard to rescue the Count it was all plain as a pikestaff. The trick was neatly arranged. A weight was laid with a line attached close to the terrace. Of course the Count could swim like a fish. He first picked up the diamonds,

caught the weight, and was hauled hand over hand like a hooked fish under the yacht and up the other side.

"When I was in the water I saw him shoot past me without moving hand or foot as fast as a darting trout. It was easy to guess the rest, so I just came out and lunched and waited."

"But why wait? Why let us make a parcel of fools of ourselves hunting in the water? Why not nab him at once?"

"I was taking no risks, young man. He might have passed the diamonds to a pal. As it is, I'm quite sure he and the diamonds are safe on board the yacht, though we may have a little trouble in laying hold of them."

Jim Morgan's eyes brightened, and his lips tightened at the word "trouble."

Mr Beck nodded approvingly.

"So I thought," he said, as if answering some remark of the other. "Can you shoot?"

"Some," said the American, modestly.

He had been reckoned the best rifle and revolver shot in Texas.

Without a word more Mr Beck passed over a serviceable revolver.

"There are three of them, I think, on board," he said, "including the Count. But they won't show fight—not real fight. I want you to do a bit of fancy shooting to scare without hurting them."

"I'm there," Jim Morgan answered, examining the revolver approvingly; "it's a nice gun."

The space of sea between the motor-boat and

the yacht closed rapidly. Mr Beck and his companion could distinguish the figure of a man at the wheel, and another leaning over the rail. More and more distinct the figures grew.

The man at the wheel was dressed in blue serge, with a stiff straw hat; the man at the rail wore white ducks, a blue coat with gilt buttons, and a gold-braided yachting cap. He held a binocular to his eyes pointed at the motor-boat.

With his hands hollowed to his lips Mr Beck sent a loud-voiced hail over the narrowing strip of sea. But the yacht held steadily on to her course. The motor-boat racing at twenty miles an hour, her keen prow cutting the water like a knife, doubled the yacht's speed. They were close under the stern when again Mr Beck yelled out a peremptory "Stop!"

For answer the man at the helm raised his right hand; there was a puff of white smoke and a sharp report, but the bullet flew wide.

"I thought so," said Mr Beck; "poor shooting! Your turn now, Morgan."

Jim Morgan raised his "gun" swiftly, his arm bent double, his elbow to his side. Without a pause for aim as the muzzle went up he fired. The straw hat, with a bullet-hole through the crown, skidded into the air, swooped on the wind like a soaring bird, and dropped far out to sea.

The steersman let go the wheel, and the yacht swung round with the wind. The man at the rails rushed to the side. Jim Morgan fired again, and his glasses jumped from his hand and crashed on the deck.

"What the blazes do you want?" he yelled.

"To come aboard," retorted Mr Beck; "lay to!"

"You'll pay dear for this outrage."

"Someone will pay dear, no doubt," Mr Beck retorted. "Let down the ladder."

The motor-boat, with engines reversed, glided smoothly under the yacht's side, and Mr Beck climbed aboard. Jim Morgan, with revolver ready, followed. There were three men on deck. The stout man in the gold-laced cap, plainly owner and skipper; the hatless helmsman—a good-looking, fair-faced young fellow with close-cropped, straw-coloured hair; the third a foreign, sallow-complexioned, common sailor with shifty eyes.

The stout skipper foamed and spluttered with rage.

"May I ask again," he growled, "what is the meaning of this outrage? Why have you forced yourself on board my boat? I demand an instant explanation."

"Why, certainly," replied Mr Beck, with invincible good humour. "I've come to arrest Count D'Armaund and his accomplices for the robbery of the Rosedale diamonds."

The stout man laughed scornfully.

"Find your Count," he said, "you are welcome to search for him."

"Don't need to," retorted Mr Beck; "I've found him."

He laid his big hand heavily on the shoulder of the bare-headed helmsman.

Again the stout man laughed derisively, and the bewildered Jim Morgan cried out:

"That's not the Count!"

But Mr Beck's strong hand gripped the man's shoulder firmly.

"It's all right, sonny," he assured the young American. "The Count's clothes, and the Count's wig, moustache and complexion have gone into the sea, but the Count himself is here. Allow me," and he snapped a pair of handcuffs on the man's wrists. "You're safe for seven years," he said pleasantly. "I've got your thumb and finger-marks on a white kid glove in a drawer in my bedroom at the hotel. See! Your turn next, my friend."

The stout captain's hand dipped towards his coat pocket, and on a sudden Mr Beck's smiling eyes blazed with anger. Quick as light a pistol was at the stout man's head.

"Hands up!" he cried sternly, "or I shoot you like a dog!"

He picked a revolver from the right-hand pocket of the pilot coat and tossed it overboard. "Ah! that's better!" and again there was the snap of the handcuffs. The third sailor submitted without protest, and the three huddled together disconsolately like fowl when a hawk is overhead.

"Now to find the diamonds," said Mr Beck, and as he spoke he caught out of the corner of his eye a glance of triumph between the Count and the captain, and guessed that his task would not be an easy one.

Nor was it. For an hour and a half, aided by Jim Morgan, he searched the yacht from stem to stern without result.

A sudden thought seemed to strike Mr Beck, and

he picked up the binocular that lay on the deck, and examined it carefully. The bullet had cut the leather casing and slightly dinted the metal; otherwise the glasses were uninjured. Mr Beck adjusted the focus and looked back over the bay.

"Ah!" he said at last briskly, and closed the glasses with a snap. "What a confounded fool I am to be sure!"

"Well?" queried Jim Morgan.

"We're going back," said Mr Beck. Then with Jim's help he furled the sails, shipped his three handcuffed prisoners into the motor-boat, and, with the yacht in tow, trailed slowly back towards the hotel.

"See that chunk of cork ahead?" he said to his companion. "I want you to pick it up as we go by. I've a fancy it may come in useful."

"What for?" queried his companion.

"Luck!" replied Mr Beck. "I've a notion it means luck."

Leaning over the side Jim Morgan splashed his hand in the water, and caught at the cork as Mr Beck steered dexterously close.

He gave a cry of surprise as he pulled it aboard. To the underside of the derelict cork was fastened a fine silk fishing line, from which a weight hung far down in the water.

"Haul in!" directed Mr Beck, and hand over hand Jim brought his catch into the boat. It proved to be a small, yellow oilskin bag tied tight at the neck.

"Oh!" cried the Yankee, with sudden understanding.

"Yes," assented Mr Beck. "Neat, wasn't it?"

And cutting the string he poured the rescued diamonds like a stream of light from the dripping mouth of the bag. "The 'Count,'" he said, "is the smartest diamond thief in Europe."

Four people dined luxuriously together that night at the Eagleton Hotel. The Rosedale diamonds glittered again round the white throat of their lovely owner, who sat at the head of the table.

"I'm glad to have them back again, of course," said Alice Rosedale, and she caressed her gems with dainty finger-tips; "but I'm twice as glad the wretched man wasn't drowned before my eyes."

"Serve him right if he were," growled the angry millionaire. "I thought I knew a thing or two, but he has taken the starch out of my shirt front. The sneaking swindler! How they'll laugh on the other side when they hear I mistook a low-down diamond thief for a full-blooded French count."

"Oh, he was a French count all right," said Mr Beck, "and as full-blooded and blue-blooded as they make them. At the back of that he is the cleverest scoundrel in Europe. He was suspected of a hand in half a dozen big coups, but up to this there never before was a particle of evidence against him."

"Lucky I called you in," said Mr Rosedale. "Your jolly good health, old man!" And he drained a brimming bumper of champagne. "Say, will you take charge of daughter and diamonds as a permanent job, and name your own salary?"

"All right, if I may be allowed to choose my own deputy," retorted Mr Beck, and he laid a kindly hand on Jim Morgan's shoulder.

" I'm satisfied," cried the millionaire, heartily.

" And you? " whispered Jim Morgan to the blushing girl beside him.

" Certainly not," she answered sharply, yet Jim Morgan seemed quite satisfied.

IV

THE SPANISH PRISONER

Mr Beck often looked in casually to a London police court. Sometimes a seemingly trivial case put him on the track of a great crime. He had been puzzling for some time over the gigantic fraud of "The Spanish Prisoner," which, worked by a gang of accomplished, unscrupulous scoundrels, yearly numbers its dupes by thousands, and its plunder by hundreds of thousands. Mr Beck's services had been requisitioned by a wealthy victim, and he was laying his plans to strike the conspiracy at its headquarters, and had even gone so far as to study the language.

By a strange coincidence, "Spanish Prisoner" were the first words he heard as he dropped into the Westminster police court. The silence of the squalid crowd that thronged the court made it plain that a case of more than ordinary interest was in progress. The magistrate—a bald-headed man who generally lay back bored by the dreary monotony of his work—leant forward eagerly, with eyes that glanced quickly from the dock to the witness chair.

In a moment Mr Beck recognised the voice of the witness. It was Mr Jonas Millbank, M.P. for a North of England constituency—able, wealthy, and eminently respectable.

" Surely he has not been caught by this transparent fraud," thought the detective, as the police respectfully made way for him to a place where he could see and hear.

Mr Millbank, M.P., was a good-looking man, about forty years of age. His mouth was firm lipped, nose large, and the cheek-bones high, indicating the canny Northern breed. But the light blue eyes looked you straight in the face, frank and smiling.

" She claims, I believe, to be a daughter of this Spanish Prisoner," he said at the moment that Mr Beck dropped into his seat.

" She! " Mr Beck's eyes went straight to the dock and opened wide with surprise.

He thought he had never seen a more beautiful girl. She seemed wholly out of place amid her dismal surroundings. The gay colours of her Spanish dress would have overtaxed a beauty less resplendent; they ministered to hers. The warm, lustrous tints of cheek and lips, the brilliancy of her great black eyes, the rich coils of her ebony hair piled on her shapely head, and breaking here and there into an unruly ringlet that fell to her shoulder—all challenged admiration as a right. She stood up in the dock straight and tall, her head well thrown back, her dark eyes fixed with angry light on the witness.

" Do you know the girl, Mr Millbank? " asked the magistrate, respectfully.

" Never saw her in my life before to-day, your worship."

A low cry came from the prisoner. She spoke a word or two in Spanish. Whatever might be the meaning of the words, there was no mistaking the

anger in her voice. Her eyes blazed on Mr Millbank's face, a thin, white line showed her teeth through the parted red lips.

"How then do you account for the annoyance, Mr Millbank?"

"I cannot account for it, your worship. I can only tell you the facts."

Mr Millbank was putting the magistrate in his place. His worship meekly accepted the correction. The witness went on:

"About six months ago, your worship, I received this curious letter from Spain:

"'DEAR FRIEND,—You will not have forgotten me. I am in trouble and danger, and to you I cry for help. But, first, I will tell you my sad story. I am a prisoner in this town, and it is for debt. You will say, what is that? can it be thus for my friend that I have known? He was rich. Well I am still rich, my dear friend, but my treasure is buried and I cannot come to it. In crossing from the mountains we buried it to escape the cruel guard who were close on our track. It is in coin and jewels, and value twenty thousand pounds of your English money.

"'Now you will say, what am I to do in this? My friend, as you know, I have a daughter. She was but a child when you saw her last, now she has grown to a woman and is very beautiful. I trust her in all things, but there is none other I can trust, only you. She has a map of the spot where the treasure is hid. This she will give to you. It is a place easily found. You will not be suspected. When the treasure is

restored, I will desire that you shall take a full third part for your share; the remainder will suffice for my daughter and myself. Come quickly, come at once, dear friend, for we have much need of you.

"'ALOROSO DE CASTRO.'"

"The usual thing," commented the magistrate, when he had himself glanced at the letter. "I have seen scores of these same letters published in *The Looking-Glass*. Never got one myself, I'm proud to say. What did you do about it, Mr Millbank?"

"Nothing, your worship, just threw it aside and let it lie. It is a mere chance I found it again."

"You did not communicate with the police?"

"What was the use—the police can do nothing. I got a number of further letters, which I mislaid, with the same signature."

"You know nothing of the man, of course?"

"Never heard of him before; if indeed there is such a man."

"Or the mythical beautiful daughter?"

"The prisoner claims to be the beautiful daughter."

"You don't say so!" The magistrate put on his spectacles for a better view of the girl in the dock. "There is always a beautiful daughter in these cases, but this is the first time she has materialised. This seems a new trick in the old game. She molested you in the street, you say. When?"

"Yesterday, your worship. Being in town for a few days, I took the opportunity to hunt up a butler in one of the registry offices. I found the accused looking, or pretending to look, for employment. When she heard my name she flew at me like a tigress.

I know a little Spanish, I have travelled in Spain, but she spoke so quickly I could only make out that she charged me with having robbed her father of twenty thousand pounds.

"I tried to soothe her. I said I knew nothing of her father or herself. But she only cried in Spanish the louder: 'Oh, you know him and you know me.'

"To avoid disturbance I left the place, but she followed me into the street, calling me 'a traitor to friendship.' A crowd gathered and some of them began to hustle me when the policeman came up, and I was reluctantly obliged to give the girl in charge. I wish your worship to deal leniently with her; I only want to be protected from annoyance.'

"The case is a grave one," said the magistrate. "The girl is plainly in some way connected with the gang of swindlers who are plundering the unwary."

"She may be the dupe, your worship," suggested Mr Millbank, kindly. "I have been a good deal in Spain, and more than once in Seville. She may mistake me for someone else."

"You have no knowledge of her?"

"None."

"Hers is a remarkable face, not likely to be forgotten?"

"I never saw her face before."

"You hear what the gentleman says, prisoner," said the magistrate. "Do you understand English?"

"A little, señor."

"He says he never saw you before."

"He is the liar, the villain, the coward, the thief!

He rob my father who is in prison, rob him of much gold, I say again."

"Come, come, my girl, you must not say that again. I cannot allow such language in Court. Is the prisoner professionally represented?"

"I appear for the prisoner," said a tall, cadaverous-looking man, with a long, yellow face and a long, shiny black coat, buttoned close up to the throat.

"Kindly tell her she must restrain herself."

"You must conduct yourself reasonably, miss," said Mr Hastings, "or I cannot continue to appear for you."

Undeterred by this terrible threat, the girl broke out again: "I speak the truth, and he the lies. His friend's money he has stolen; his friend that trusted him; his friend, my father, that is in prison. Ah!"

Her anger overflowed the limits of her broken English, and broke out in a rushing torrent of sonorous Spanish. Her gestures were splendid as she denounced the imperturbable Mr Millbank.

Mr Beck's recent study of the language enabled him to fish up a word or two out of the rushing stream.

"He is a traitor," she cried at last, "and I will have my revenge."

Then, to the surprise of all in Court, she whipped a short poinard from her girdle, held it in the air, and so stood with black eyes blazing—a statue of vengeance incarnate.

The magistrate jumped on the Bench. "Silence!" he shouted. "Constable, take the knife from the young woman."

The young woman put the dagger quietly back in

its place, but kept her hand on the hilt, and the constable made no attempt to capture it.

"This is a grave case," the magistrate went on, "and I fear I must deal with it seriously. I would willingly give effect to Mr Millbank's merciful views, which I must say do him much credit under the circumstances. But I have a duty to the public. Here is a very dangerous young woman plainly in league with a corrupt gang. I fear I must inflict a sharp term of imprisonment."

"Might I interrupt for one moment, your worship?"

"What's that? Oh, Mr Beck, glad to see you; certainly, Mr Beck. What do you wish to say?"

"Could your worship see your way to letting the prisoner out on bail to be of good behaviour?"

"There is no one to go bail for her."

"I will go bail for any amount you please."

"I should be very glad, Mr Beck, but—"

"Don't say 'but,' your worship. I'm sure I can convince you if you will kindly give me a word in private."

Five minutes' conversation between Mr Millbank, Mr Beck and the magistrate settled the matter. Mr Beck undertook that Mr Millbank should have no further annoyance from the girl, whom he meant to send back to Spain as soon as possible. Meantime, he hoped she might drop a hint which would put him on the track of the gang who worked the fraud.

"If necessary," he added to the magistrate, when the other had left, "I will have Mr Millbank watched and protected without his having the least suspicion."

The young girl was in quite another mood when they returned to Court. The fit of passion had passed and left her limp. The constable had told her she would surely be hanged, and she made a pitiful appeal to the magistrate for mercy.

Mr Beck, watching her closely, as, with streaming eyes, she prayed for her life, thought to himself she would make the finest actress on the stage.

"It is all right, my girl," he said reassuringly, "you are not going to be hurt this time." Then, with an effort, he managed to screw out a few kindly words in Spanish.

At the familiar sound she turned to him in eager delight, and simply smothered him with a melodious torrent of speech.

"All right," he protested, when at last he could get a word in, "tell me the rest at your leisure. You are to come with me, if you don't mind; we'll take a hansom to your place. Where are you staying?"

But when she gave him the address he said: "No, that won't do. That is not the place at all for a nice-looking girl like you, my dear. Cabby, drive to Dickens' Private Hotel, Norfolk Street.

"The landlady," he explained to the girl, in stumbling Spanish, "is a great friend of mine and will take care of you. Now tell me your name. I'll have to introduce you."

"Aurora de Castro." The termagant had vanished. A school-girl, shy and grateful, was beside him in the hansom, and for the first time the conviction came to Mr Beck that the girl—whatever else she might be—was a lady born.

"Look here, Aurora! I may call you Aurora?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, if you will tell me the truth I will do what I can for you."

"You will release my father; you will restore our treasure; you will punish this most wicked man?"

"Perhaps," said Mr Beck, drily; "we'll see about that. I want your story first, if you please; but here we are at the hotel."

Mrs Cunningham, manageress and proprietress, met them in the hall—a good-humoured Irishwoman whom twenty years of residence in London had not robbed of her mellifluous brogue.

"Ah, then good day to you, Mr Beck," she said cheerily, "and whom have we here?"—with a swift glance at the brilliant figure in the cab. "I'm ashamed of you going about in hansom cabs with your Italian countesses," she exclaimed mockingly, "and at your time of life, too. An elderly person like myself would be more suitable."

"That's all right," said the placid Mr Beck. "I want you to do me a great favour, Mrs Cunningham."

"If I can I will," she answered at once, "you may take that for granted."

"Well, you must take care of this young lady for me, and keep an eye on her comings and goings and her visitors, if any."

"But, my dear Mr Beck, isn't she a 'leetle' remarkable for a quiet place like mine?"

"Don't worry about that. She's Spanish and she's a lady, and she'll dress as quietly as you like. I want you to see to all that later on. Meanwhile,

will you let us have lunch in a private room? I must have a chat with her before I leave. Come in, Aurora," he said at the cab door, "I want to introduce you to my friend, Mrs Cunningham, who'll take care of you."

"Let me show you your room, my dear," said the good-natured Irishwoman, captivated by the beauty and gentle manners of the girl; "you are lucky to have found a friend in Mr Beck."

Half an hour later Mr Beck and the daughter of the Spanish Prisoner sat down to a comfortable little luncheon in a private room, though Mrs Cunningham, at the door, protested to Mr Beck she was "shocked at his goings-on."

Mr Beck refused to hear a word of her story till the girl had finished her luncheon. "You cannot eat and talk," he said, "and you must be hungry."

He was right there. No nibbler of fragments was this young Spanish beauty. She ate with the hearty appetite of youth and health, and Mr Beck watched approvingly.

"I had only a cup of coffee and nothing this morning," she explained, as she pushed away her plate at last and sipped a glass of light wine.

"Now," said Mr Beck, "what is it all about?"

"He is a traitor," she said, with a sudden flash of her old anger.

"That's all right," he chimed in soothingly. "You said that before, you know, and we'll take that for granted. But your father—is he the Spanish Prisoner?"

"My father, alas! is still in prison, and his treasure is stolen."

"We will never get any further at this rate; begin at the beginning. Tell me all about your father."

"His name? It is Don Aloroso de Castro. My mother died when I was born. He has no other child. He was very rich, but, alas! now he is no longer rich; his treasure has been stolen."

"I know all that," interpolated Mr Beck, "we'll come to that later on. What was your father before he became a Spanish prisoner?"

"My father was a banker at Konda. You know it is about forty miles from Cadiz. We have also a house at Cadiz, but chiefly we lived at Konda. He had much treasure in his bank, gold, notes and jewellery, and many customers. He was for Don Carlos, of course."

"For what did you say?"

"For Don Carlos, the true King of Spain—a man, not a foolish boy whom they dress in king's clothes. You are for Don Carlos, are you not, Don Becko?"

"Well, I have not quite made up my mind yet," Don Becko answered sedately. "I'll think it over; meanwhile go on with your story."

"My father he helped Don Carlos with money, and even bought arms for him which were stored in the bank vaults and carried away at night. The Civil Guard knew nothing of all this, but after a while even they suspected. There were whispers in Cadiz and the sound of them came across the

mountain to Konda. So my father thought he would be wise to leave Konda and come to Cadiz. For you see, while we were at Konda, the Carlists would come to the house."

"I see," assented Mr Beck, shortly; "a case of save me from my friends."

She only half caught his meaning.

"From our friends, no, from our enemies—the friends of the tyrant. We did not wish to go. But I feared for him and he for me, and so it was agreed upon. The bank was closed and our debts were paid —all except one to a great friend of my father who lived in Cadiz, and to him we were bringing the money. But you shall hear. It was—I cannot count in your English—seven, eight, nine, ten weeks since we set out to cross the mountains. The Civil Guard offered to protect us, but we would not. My father asked them to protect instead the bank, where it was thought the treasure still lay, for we put it out that we were going only on a visit to Cadiz, and would return.

"So we two started early in the morning, hoping to reach Cadiz by nightfall. We rode on mules with a third mule to carry the baggage, and amongst the rest of the baggage there was a leather portmanteau in which the treasure was packed."

Mr Beck made a mental note of the portmanteau. It was a coincidence that all Spanish prisoners' stories ran on the same lines; there was always a leather portmanteau.

"We brought with us no servants to avoid suspicion. Our household remained for the time in

Konda. There are two roads from Konda to Cadiz as you must know, Don Becko? "

"Cannot say I do exactly," said Mr Beck, modestly.

"We chose the longer but the easier of the two. It was fortunate for us we did so. For miles it lay through the valley with bordering vineyards and olive groves—a smooth and pleasant road where the mules went forward swiftly. Already four leagues lay behind, when we came to the place at the entrance to the pass where the two roads join, and begin together to climb up into the mountain.

"By this time the sun was nearly straight over us, and the sky was like the lid of an oven closing in the heat upon the roasting earth, for there was no cloud nor wind. The mules sweated under their loads and the heat pressed upon us like a weight. Our shadows were no more than round blots on the burnt ground.

"We welcomed the shelter and coolness of the inn that stood at the meeting of the roads. The cup of cold wine and water was what the souls in purgatory pray for. My father, exhausted by the heat, lay indoors, till the anger of the sun should have passed. But for me I sat in the summer-house in the garden, where the thatch of green leaves was so thick that no sun could enter, and so slipped softly into sleep.

"The sound of strange voices got mixed with my dreams, till I suddenly woke to know they were real. Close by the summer-house where I lay the road ran, and by the roadside, under the trees, were men resting

and talking. They spoke of Don Carlos and the Civil Guard, and suddenly I heard my father's name. 'Don Aloroso,' said the rough voice of an old man. 'Don Aloroso goes to meet the friends of Don Carlos on the mountain. But the Civil Guard have heard of it and pursue them. This morning a company went down by the shortest road to Konda to arrest him.'

"'I hear he gives money, much money, to Don Carlos,' said the shriller voice of youth. 'By Bacchus, if I had money, it should go for wine.'

"'It is but a mile now to my house where there is a skinful of the best in Spain,' the first voice answered, and then the noise of their speech passed slowly out of my hearing.

"I had heard enough. My sleep was over for the day. Going swiftly down to the *posada*, I woke my father and told him what I had heard. It frightened him, Don Becko, though he is not a man easily made afraid. 'My little girl,' he said, 'it is ruin if they catch us with this treasure in our possession. They will swear, as these country fools have said, we bring it to Don Carlos. It means death for me, and for my little girl poverty and the misery that comes with poverty. We must start instantly.'

"Then, though the sun was still high up in the heavens, we resumed our journey at once, urging the mules to their best speed. On from this inn the pathway climbed the mountain, winding through the rocks and passing here and there over a ledge that made one dizzy to look down from.

"But the mules moved without fear, planting their feet as steadily on the narrow ledge as on the broad

high road. The air grew cooler as we climbed, and the country below lay wide and lovely in the sunshine. Like the narrow lines of a map we could distinguish far beneath us the roads that lead out of Konda.

"My father had brought with him a field-glass, and every now and then he turned to scan the roads back to the horizon's edge. 'Safe so far, Aurora,' he would say to me after each long look, and urge the mules to better speed.

"When we had reached almost to the ridge of the pass where the pathway begins to run down hill towards Cadiz, my father stopped for a last look at the ribbons of road that ran through the plain far below.

"He started, looked again long and steadily, then handed the glasses to me. 'Your eyes are younger than mine, my child,' he said.

"I swept the road back from the foot of the hill to the horizon's edge, and found at last what I sought yet did not wish to find. Rocks and trees, small and dim in the distance, grew large and clear as they glided into the range of the glasses. The ribbon widened into a rugged road, and along it mounted men—small as toy soldiers, but clear beyond mistaking—moved swiftly up towards the mountain.

"'They will overtake us before we reach Cadiz,' groaned my father.

"'We might hide,' I hinted.

"'Impossible, impossible; they must have already seen us. But yet—oh, there is some hope yet, we might hide the portmanteau with the money and papers. They dare not arrest us without some

proof. Quick, child, quick! It is an hour before they are here, and now the ridge hides us from view.'

"We urged the mules just over the edge of the pass, and then looked around for a likely hiding-place.

"By the side of the track on a terrace in the flank of the hill was a Moorish ruin—shrine, or fortress, I cannot say—sheltered from the north wind by three tall pines, the centre of the three bent so."

With a few deft bold strokes of a pencil she drew on a sheet of notepaper what she had described.

"As quickly as we could we carried the portmanteau down to the terrace, and found by good fortune just what we looked for. The walls and roof had crumbled in. The place looked a solid mass of masonry, overgrown with wild vines and weeds. But circling it I spied on the side that faced the valley, faintly showing through the thick overgrowth, the outline of a stone or two cut in the fashion of a Moorish arch.

"We drew the wild vines and creepers apart, and found a window in the wall about two yards from the ground. My father climbed to the window. I helped to lift the portmanteau to him, and he pushed it through, lowering it gently to the ground. Then we re-arranged the curtain of wild vine, with its close cluster of small berries, till no sign of window or arch was visible.

"An hour later, when two of the Civil Guard came softly over the ridge of the pass, they found a man and girl resting in an angle of the track with their mules tethered close by.

"There were the remains of a slight repast—bread

and fruit and a flagon of wine. The man was restfully smoking a cigarette, and the girl was sketching the lovely view with a Moorish ruin and three tall pine trees in the foreground. Oh, Don Becko, you will understand? "

" A map of the place," said Mr Beck.

She nodded. " You understand; even before their very eyes I drew it. But they never for one moment suspected.

" The leader of the band, Don Fabrice, I knew. I had met him before. I had danced with him."

Mr Beck noted that the frank and easy narrative suddenly became abrupt and disjointed.

" My father invited Don Fabrice to eat with us. He would not. One would have thought we were the police and he the fugitive, he looked so frightened.

" ' Don Aloroso,' he blurted out, ' I come on a most unpleasant duty. I have been sent to seize certain treasure, which it is said you carry to agents of Don Carlos, and to arrest you for high treason. I crave your pardon, and yours, Donna Aurora, but if I had refused the duty it would have been intrusted to another less considerate.' He looked aside at a tall man, also in the uniform of an officer, who stood apart glowering—Don Rodrigo, whom also I knew and liked not.

" My father smiled, and rolled a cigarette between his fingers. ' Trouble yourself not, my friend,' he said. ' You are welcome to the treasure if you find it.'

" Why should I weary you with a long story, Don

Becko? They searched our baggage and found—nothing. Don Rodrigo searched closest and was savage at his failure. He was rude in manner and question. Twice I thought that he and Don Fabrice would have drawn swords on each other.

"At last even Don Rodrigo was convinced there was no treasure—neither dreamt we had hidden it. Why should we hide it when we had had no notice of their coming? Don Fabrice was most kind, and even Don Rodrigo made a sulky apology.

"There is little more to be told. They both came down with us to Cadiz, Don Fabrice riding at my rein, and the other a score of paces behind.

"For awhile all went well at Cadiz. Suspicion was at rest, and my father was planning a little excursion into the hills, which were only a few hours' ride, when suddenly he was arrested for debt at the suit of Don Ambrosio de Legna.

"Don Ambrosio was a friend whom my father loved and trusted. But he wanted me to marry him and was furious when I refused him. He had money in our bank at Konda. Somehow, he learnt we had brought no money with us to Cadiz. The day after our return he asked me again to be his wife, and when I again refused he had my father thrown into prison for debt.

"I was in great trouble, Don Becko. My father could not help me. I dared not tell Don Fabrice of his persecution, or there would be a duello, and I dared not slip away to the mountains for our treasure to pay my father's debt, for Don Rodrigo was always at my heels.

"It was then we thought of writing to Don Millbank in London."

"You knew him before?" asked Mr Beck.

"Oh, yes, for five years. We were in Toledo when I was so high." She set a shapely brown hand within half a yard of the floor to indicate her height. "One night it seems the Englishman had been rude to a girl. I hardly know the story, I was so young then. Her lover was angry. He had a knife drawn and would have stabbed the Englishman, but my father struck it from his hand. That night the Englishman came home to supper. He was grateful, oh, so grateful to my father. He called him the saviour of his life, and asked us both to come and see him in England. Behold, I alone have come to find him."

The girl's full red lips tightened, and the angry light rekindled in her black eyes.

"That's all right, my dear," put in Mr Beck, soothingly; "go on with your story. Did Mr Millbank go to Spain when your father wrote to him?"

"At once, oh, at once, he was so kind. All we wanted he would do, and would take no reward. Then I gave him my sketch of the place, and told him where to look; and so one morning he rode away to the mountains, promising to bring the treasure back the same evening. But he never came back, and then I knew he was a liar and a thief. I suspected him when I saw him, but my father trusted him."

"What next?" asked Mr Beck. "Go on with your story; it's interesting."

"I sold my trinkets and my watch, and I followed him here. There was a man in London I knew. He was what you call a butler when we lived in Toledo. Afterwards they say he was in trouble, and joined the bandits. What do I know? It was only talk. But he left the country and came to London. I wrote to him, and he found a room for me, and told me where I might find your Mr Millbank."

"Not mine," protested Mr Beck; "I claim no share of him."

"Oh, you believe in him," she answered quickly. "He is what you call respectable. He will not steal —is it not so?"

She looked keenly in his face and read nothing there but blank good-nature, and turned from him with quick impatience.

"But Pedro believes in me; Pedro knows me well. Oh, I should not have spoken—I should not have told you his name!"

"Perhaps not," retorted Mr Beck. "Pedro seems a modest and retiring kind of gentleman. If I were you I would not trouble him any more in this business. Will you promise you will have nothing more to say to Pedro on the subject?"

She hesitated for a moment. "Yes," she said slowly at last, "I will promise." She looked away from Mr Beck's steady gaze as she said it.

"One thing more," he added. "I want to change your Spanish money for English notes or gold."

"Certainly; it is not much." She bundled some small notes and a few Spanish gold pieces out of her purse, and gave them into his broad palm without a look at what he offered in exchange.

"Well, good-bye," he said; "steer clear of Pedro till we meet. Mrs Cunningham will take care of you. I hope to see you again in a week or a fortnight at furthest."

"But you will help me to find the treasure?"

"Yes, I will help you to find the truth," he answered gravely.

The girl flung herself back into the chair as the door closed after Mr Beck and laughed softly to herself with a laugh like the pleased purr of a cat. "That's all right," she murmured in Spanish; "he is a clever man, this Don Becko. We will see."

. . . . . .

"A man for me?" said Mr Millbank. "All right, show him in." It was the day after his appearance in the police-court, and he was having late breakfast in his private room at the Grand Hotel.

A middle-aged, stoutly-built man, dressed plainly but not shabbily, came quietly into the room, carrying a new top hat awkwardly in his hand.

"I come about the situation, sir," he began respectfully before Mr Millbank could question him. "I understand you are on the lookout for a butler, and I come to offer myself."

"Why not apply through the registry office?" queried Mr Millbank.

"Because I believe in direct dealings, sir. I like to come to headquarters. Here are my testimonials."

He took a bundle of letters from his pocket and laid them respectfully on the breakfast-table.

They were all excellent. One from the Duchess

of Southern found special favour with Mr Millbank.

He knew her Grace's handwriting. He had seen it often and always with pleasure on delicate invitations to dinner or dance, for her Grace was a social leader of the party to which he belonged.

"I have much pleasure"—the letter ran—"in strongly recommending Mr Marshall for the position of butler. While in my service he proved himself invaluable. He is sober, honest, and most trustworthy—a capital waiter and always at hand when he is required. From what I know of him I feel sure he will discharge efficiently any duties he may undertake."

"The Duchess is very complimentary," said Mr Millbank, smiling; "why did you leave her?"

"I wanted a holiday, sir. The work was hard and responsible."

"You will find my work lighter," said Mr Millbank.

"I trust so, sir."

"I certainly do not entertain on the same scale as the Duchess, nor do I pay the same wages."

"Wages are no great consideration with me, sir, if I can give satisfaction."

"I think you will suit me. Can you come at once?"

"At once, sir."

"The Duchess will recommend you, I suppose?"

"She said she would be glad to give me a strong personal recommendation, sir, at any time."

" I'm afraid she is out of town at present. Well, I may see her later on. She is a very intimate friend of mine. Meanwhile, you may come at once if the terms suit."

The terms suited Mr Marshall. He showed himself easily pleased in money matters, and the upshot of the interview was that he returned with Mr Millbank to his handsome villa residence, which stood in its own ground, five miles away, clear of the smoke and tumult of London, but was brought close by train, telegraph and telephone to the heart of the great city.

For three whole days Mr Marshall proved himself a model butler. On the third day Mr Millbank gave a little bachelor's dinner, and everything went off splendidly. The attendance was perfect, the champagne was cooled and the claret warmed to precisely the right point. That night Mr Millbank flattered himself he had found a treasure. The next night he changed his mind.

He returned home late from dining in the City, let himself in quietly with his latchkey, and entering the dining-room found the electric light turned on to the full, his model butler lolling in an easy chair blind drunk, with a half-filled bottle of port on the table in front of him, and two empty bottles on the carpet beside his chair.

One glass, at least, had gone the wrong way, as was shown by a broad, dark crimson stain on the white damask. Mr Marshall's face, usually so placid, wore a very truculent expression in liquor. With the first quick glance Mr Millbank noticed the butt of a big revolver bulging from his pocket.

The drunken butler did not seem the least disturbed by the sudden advent of his master.

"Have a glass of port, old boy," he said, and lifted the bottle to fill the glass, but it dropped with a crash on the floor.

"All right, all right, my covey," stammered the excellent Mr Marshall; "no hurry; get in another bottle. You and I, old cracksman, will have a drain together. Both in the same trade, don't you see; both on the Spanish Main. Fetch another bottle, old boy."

Mr Millbank's nerves were not strong. For a moment he was frightened to death at the truculent appearance of this drunken bully. But in an instant he realised that the brute was too drunk to be dangerous.

"What are you waiting for?" stammered Marshall, lurching towards him. "Want money to pay for the drink? Here it is for you." He clapped a Spanish coin down on the table. "There's more where that came from." He dived his hand into his breeches pocket, and fished up a fistful of money—Spanish notes and gold.

"Confidence trick, old man," mumbled the drunken butler with an ugly laugh. "You did Don what you call him, and I do you. Drink together, old pal."

Mr Millbank's face flushed and paled as he saw the money on the table. His resolution was quickly taken and acted on.

"Right you are," he said, laying a timid hand on the drunkard's shoulder and pressing him down into his chair, "I'll fetch the wine."

"You did Don what you call him, and I do you Drink together, old pal."

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He would have locked the door behind him, but the key was not in the lock; so he had to be content with closing it carefully.

He went straight to the telephone, and got on to Scotland Yard.

"Hullo! are you there? Yes; put me on to the inspector. I'm Mr Millbank, of Burlington—yes, Member of Parliament. Listen. I want you to send two men out to my place as soon as possible. Yes, my butler has got drunk and is violent. Yes, they had better come armed. No, there is no immediate danger, but send at once. All right; good-bye."

"Now to see what the ruffian has stolen," he muttered, as he rang off and replaced the receiver. "How the blazes did he find out the secret of the safe?"

Closing the door behind him, he switched on the light in his bedroom. He took down a small picture that hung on the panelled paper of the wall, and pressed the little brass nail on which it hung. Instantly a thin sheeting of wood, opening neatly on the lines of the paper panel, showed the door of a large safe let into the wall. Mr Millbank fitted a tiny key to the lock softly and smoothly, the massive door opened level with the floor, and he lugged out a heavy old leather portmanteau on the carpet.

"It feels all right," he said, "and it looks all right. The lock has not been tampered with. But then, where did the brute get all that Spanish money, and what did he mean by his talk about Don what's-his-name?"

"Will you kindly permit me to explain?" said a

quiet voice at his ear, and a strong hand was laid on his shoulder. A glance was enough. Chill terror froze his voice, for leaning over him, revolver in hand, was his drunken butler.

No, not drunken. The hand that held the revolver was steady as a rock—there was a bland, good-humoured smile on the broad face. Mr Millbank noticed, too, that the black mutton-chop whiskers were gone, and the expression of the face wholly changed. Surely he had seen that genial smile, those twinkling eyes before. Through the mist of bewilderment in which he was lost the truth dawned on him suddenly.

"Oh, I see," said Mr Beck, pleasantly. "You know me at last. I suppose I need not explain further. I wanted to find out where you had hidden this "—he touched the portmanteau with his toe—"and you were kind enough to show me. That's why I showed you the Spanish money. I knew the sight of it would send you to see if your treasure were safe.

"Now to business; allow me." He stooped and extracted a dainty revolver from the breast-pocket of Mr Millbank's frock coat. "We don't want those playthings," he said, as he dropped the two weapons into his own coat pocket, "they disturb conversation and we have only a short time for our chat. You know, I suppose, you have got to do what I tell you?"

In spite of the good-humoured smile and twinkling eyes there was a tone of quiet determination in the spoken words that made Mr Millbank wince. "That's all right," Mr Beck added. "I see you understand

the situation. "I heard you telephone for the police. They will be here, I suppose, in half an hour. What do you mean to say to them? You won't tell. Have you any curiosity to know what I mean to say or do? Does it occur to you that I might clap on a pair of handcuffs and hand you over to your own police for theft and perjury? They know me and would take you quick enough on my word. That portmanteau is chock-full of evidence for the prosecution. What do you say to that?"

Mr Millbank said nothing to that. Something in Mr Beck's face and manner told him that gentleman's mind was made up. He waited to hear more.

"Well, I'm disposed to give you a chance," said Mr Beck, after a pause, "though you don't deserve it. It is not for your sake, mind you. I want the young lady you cheated and her father to get back their valuables at once. I don't want the fuss and delay of a prosecution; see? That's where your chance comes in. Now listen to what you have got to say and do. When the police come you must tell them you had a quarrel with your butler—that's me —that you accused me of drunkenness and theft, and that you found you were wrong and apologised. You want me to stay on; I insist on leaving at once. I have my portmanteau packed to go with me. This is my portmanteau. You will give the men a sovereign each for their trouble, and they will take me and my portmanteau back to London. Mind, it's that, or arrest and prosecution."

"What are you going to do with the portmanteau?" asked Mr Millbank, tremulously.

"That's my business. Are you afraid I'll cheat the Spanish Prisoner and his daughter?"

"I'm honestly entitled to a third."

"Not exactly."

"But I was promised a third for my trouble."

"Easy there. You tried to steal it, not to save it for the owner. You grabbed all and you've lost all. We don't pay salvage on theft—not a farthing. Do you take my offer?"

"I suppose I must," growled Mr Millbank, sulkily; "there is nothing else."

"Oh, don't delude yourself. You can have the handcuffs and the gaol instead if you prefer them. Make up your mind which it is to be—quick!" There was sudden menace in the curt word, and Mr Millbank gasped out a hurried acceptance.

"I thought so—of two evils—you know the proverb. Mind you play your part properly."

The two Scotland Yard men arriving in hot haste were glad to hear the trouble was over. They each pocketed a sovereign, and had a cold-meat supper, washed down with a couple of glasses of port apiece of Mr Beck's choosing, and cheerily carried the offended butler and his portmanteau back with them to London.

"Jolly old cock," said one to the other, when they had dropped Mr Beck at Charing Cross, "sings a good song."

"And opens a good bottle, by Jingo; he got the bulge on his boss. See the way he packed him out of the dining-room?"

Twelve days later a four-wheeler drove to the door of Mrs Cunningham's hotel. There were three men

in it, one young, one old, both stately looking, with dark complexions and brilliant dark eyes. Mr Beck was the third.

"She is waiting for you in the private sitting-room," he said. Carrying a heavy portmanteau as lightly as if it were a brown-paper parcel, he led the way upstairs.

"Come in," cried a sweet voice in answer to the knock, and the old man went first into the room.

Aurora had been reading. She put down her book and sprang to her feet as he entered. A moment she stood, her bosom heaving, her black eyes wide open with amazement. Then sudden joy flooded them with light.

"Father!" she cried exultingly, and flung herself into the arms of Don Aloroso. She lay there laughing and sobbing, unconscious of all things else in the world but her great joy. Mr Beck coughed.

Lissom as a willow wand she slipped from her father's embrace, caught the detective's heavy face between her two hands and kissed him twice.

"Now Don Fabrice," suggested Mr Beck, maliciously.

The rich blood flooded her face.

"Don Fabrice is very welcome," she said demurely with downcast eyes, and she gave him her hand, which he clasped and kissed—the lover unmistakable.

"I came over with your father," he said, "only for a day. I could get no longer leave, but I could not deny myself the pleasure of telling you I have been

promoted. I am now a captain. I have a future. I will return again next year if I may? "

A shy consenting smile was her answer to the eager entreaty in his voice.

" But my father? " she asked.

" Oh, your father," replied Mr Beck, briskly, as he lifted a heavy old leather valise into the room, " your father has come to stay. He has brought his portmanteau."

V

THE MURDER ON THE GOLF LINKS

"Don't go in, don't! don't! please don't!"

The disobedient ball, regardless of her entreaties, crept slowly up the smooth green slope, paused irresolute on the ridge, and then trickled softly down into the hole; a wonderful "put."

Miss Mag Hazel knocked her ball impatiently away from the very edge. "Lost again on the last green," she cried petulantly. "You have abominable luck, Mr Beck."

Mr Beck smiled complacently. "Never denied it, Miss Hazel. Better be born lucky than clever is what I always say."

"But you are clever, too," said the girl, repentantly. "I hear everyone say how clever you are."

"That's where my luck comes in."

He slung the girl's golf bag over a broad shoulder, and caught his own up in a big hand. "Come," he said, "you will be late for dinner, and every man in the hotel will curse me as the cause."

They were the last on the links. The western sky was a sea of crimson and gold, in which floated a huge black cloud, shaped like a sea monster with the blazing sun in its jaws. The placid surface of the sea

gave back the beauty of the sky, and in the clear, still air familiar objects took on a new beauty. Their way lay over the crisp velvet of the seaside turf, embroidered with wild flowers, to the Thornvale Hotel in the valley a mile away.

"How beautiful!" the girl whispered half to herself, and caught her breath with a queer little sigh.

Mr Beck looked down and saw that the blue eyes were very bright with tears. She met his look and smiled a wan little smile.

"Lovely scenery always makes me sad," she explained feebly. Then after a second she added impulsively: "Mr Beck, you and I are good friends, aren't we?"

"I hope so," said Mr Beck, gravely. "I can speak for myself anyway."

"Oh, I'm miserable! I must tell it to someone. I'm a miserable girl!"

"If I can help you in any way," said Mr Beck, stoutly, "you may count on me."

"I know I oughtn't to talk about such things, but I must, I cannot stop myself; then perhaps you could say a word to father; you and he are such good friends."

Mr Beck knew there was a confession coming. In some curious way Mr Beck attracted the most unlikely confidences. All sorts and conditions of people felt constrained to tell him secrets.

"It's this way," Miss Hazel went on. "Sit down there on that bank and listen. I'll be in lots of time for dinner, and anyhow I don't care. Father wants me to marry Mr Samuel Hawkins, a horrible name and a horrible man. I didn't mind much at the time

he first spoke of it. I was very young, you see; I lived in a French convent school until father came back from India, and then we lived in a cottage near a golf links. Oh! such a quiet golf links, and Mr Hawkins came down to see us, and he first taught me how to play. I liked him because there was no one else. So when he asked me to marry him, and father wished it so much, I half promised —that is, I really did promise, and we were engaged, and he gave me a diamond ring, which I have here—in my purse."

Mr Beck smiled benignly. The girl was very young and pretty and innocent—little more than a child, who had been playing at a make-believe engagement.

"How long is it since you changed your mind?" he asked.

"Well, I never really made it up to marry Mr Hawkins. I only just agreed to become engaged. But about a week or ten days ago I found I could not go on with it."

"I see; that was about the time, was it not, that the young electrical engineer, Mr Ryan, arrived?"

She flushed hotly.

"Oh! it's not that at all—how hateful you are! Mr Ryan is nothing to me, nothing. Besides, he was most rude; called me a flirt, and said I led him on and never told him I was engaged. Now we don't even speak, and I'm so miserable. What shall I do?"

"Don't fret," said Mr Beck, cheerily; "it will come all right."

"Oh! but it cannot come all right. Father will be bitterly disappointed if I don't marry Mr Hawkins. He's awfully rich, carries diamonds about loose in his waistcoat pocket. He has fifty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds getting brightened up in Amsterdam; that's where they put a polish on them, you know. He showed father the receipt for them mixed up with bank-notes in his pocket-book. His friend, Mr Bolton, who is in the same business, says Mr Hawkins is a millionaire."

"And Mr Ryan has only his brains and his profession," said Mr Beck, cynically.

"Now you are just horrid. I don't care twopence about Mr Hawkins' diamonds or his millions. But I love father better than anyone else."

"Except?" suggested Mr Beck, maliciously.

"There is no exception—not one. You come second-best yourself."

"Oh, do I? Then I will see if I cannot find some diamonds and cut out Mr Hawkins. Meantime, let us get on to our dinner. You need not be in any hurry to break your heart. You are not going to marry Mr Hawkins to-morrow or the day after. Something may happen to stop the marriage altogether. Come along."

Something did happen. What that awful something was neither Miss Hazel nor Mr Beck dreamt of at the time.

It was the fussy half hour before dinner when they arrived at the veranda of the big Thornvale Hotel that had grown out of the Thornvale golf links. As Miss Mag Hazel passed through the throng every eye paid its tribute of admiration; she was by reason of

her golf and good looks the acknowledged queen of the place.

A tall, handsome young fellow near the porch gave a pitiful look as she passed, the humble, appealing look in the eyes of a dog who has offended his master.

"How handsome he is; what beautiful black eyes he has!" her heart whispered, but her face was unconscious of his existence.

She evaded a small, dark man with a big hooked nose who came forward eagerly to claim her. "Don't speak to me, Mr Hawkins, don't look at me. I have not five minutes to dress for dinner."

A tall, thin man with a grey, drooping moustache stood close by her left in the central hall. To him she said: "I will be down in a minute, dad. I want you to take me in to dinner, mind. You are worth the whole lot of them put together."

Colonel Hazel's sallow cheek flushed with delight, for he loved his daughter with a love that was the best part of his life.

Big, good-humoured, smiling Tom Bolton, as the girl went in to dinner on her father's arm, whispered a word in the ear of his friend, Sam Hawkins, and the millionaire diamond merchant cast a scowling glance at handsome Ned Ryan, who gave him frown for frown with interest thereto.

At Thornvale Hotel the company lived, moved, and had their being in golf. They played golf all day on the links, and talked golf all the evening at the hotel. All the varied forms of golf lunacy were in evidence there. There was the fat elderly lady who went round "for her figure," tapping the ball before her

on the smooth ground, and throwing it or carrying it over the bunkers. There was the man who was always grumbling about his "blanked" luck, and who never played what he was pleased to think was his "true game."

There was the man who sang comic songs on the green, and the man whose nerves were strained like fiddle-strings and tingled at every stir or whisper, whom the flight of a butterfly put off his stroke. There was a veteran of eighty-five, who still played a steady game. He had once been a scratch man, and though the free, loose vigour of his "swing" was lost, his eye and arm had not forgotten the lesson of years. His favourite opponent was a boy of twelve, who swung loose and free as if he were a figure of indiarubber with no bones in his arms.

Mr Hawkins and Mr Bolton were a perfect match with a level handicap of twelve; each believed that he could just beat the other, and the excitement of their incessant contests was intense.

But Miss Mag Hazel reigned undisputed queen of the links. None of the ladies, and only one or two of the men, could even "give her a game." Lissom as an ash sapling, every muscle in her body, from her shoulder to her ankle, took part in the graceful swing which, without effort, drove the ball further than a strong man could smite it by brute force. Her wrist was like a fine steel spring, as sensitive and as true.

Heretofore only one player disputed her supremacy —Mr Beck, the famous detective, who was idling a month in the quiet hotel after an exciting and successful criminal hunt half way round the world.

Mr Beck was, as he always proclaimed, a lucky player. If he never made a brilliant stroke, he never made a bad one, and kept wonderfully clear of the bunkers. The brilliant players found he had an irritating trick of plodding on steadily, and coming out a hole ahead at the end of the round.

He and Mag Hazel played constantly together until young Ned Ryan came on the scene. Ryan was a brilliant young fellow with muscles of whipcord and whalebone, whose drive was like a shot from a catapult. But he played a sporting game, and very often drove into the bunker which was meant to catch the second shot of a second-class player. Mag Hazel found it easier to hold her own against his brilliance than against the plodding pertinacity of Mr Beck.

It may be that the impressionable young Irishman could not quite play his game when she was his opponent. He found it hard to obey the golfer's first commandment: "Keep your eye on the ball." He tried to play two games at the same time, and golf will have no divided allegiance.

The end of a happy fortnight came suddenly. It was a violent scene when, in a grassy bunker wide of the course, into which he had deliberately pulled his ball, he asked her to marry him, and learnt that she was engaged to the millionaire diamond merchant, Mr Hawkins. Poor Ned Ryan, with Irish impetuosity, raved and stormed at her cruelty in leading him to love her, swore his life was barren for evermore, and even muttered some very mysterious, meaningless threats against the more fortunate Mr Hawkins.

Tender-hearted Mag had been very meek and

penitent while he raved and stormed, but he was not to be appeased by her meekness, and flung away from her in a rage.

Then it was her turn to be implacable when he became penitent. All that evening he hovered round her like a blundering moth round a lamp, but she ignored him as completely as the lamp the moth and shed the light of her smiles on Mr Beck.

So those two foolish young people played the old game in the old, foolish fashion, and tormented themselves and each other. The two men concerned in the matter, Mr Ryan and Mr Hawkins, scowled at each other on the golf links and at the bridge table, to the intense amusement of the company, who understood how little golf or cards had to do with the quarrel.

At last Ned Ryan had an open row with Mr Hawkins on the golf links, and told him, quite unnecessarily, he was no gentleman.

Then suddenly this light comedy deepened into sombre tragedy. The late breakfasters at the hotel were still at table when the thrilling, shocking news came to them that Mr Hawkins had been found murdered on the links.

Perhaps it is more convenient to tell the dismal story in the order in which it was told in evidence at the coroner's inquest.

Mr Hawkins and Mr Bolton had arranged a round in the early morning before breakfast, when they would have the links to themselves. They had a glass of milk and a biscuit, and started off in good spirits, each boasting he was certain to win.

They started some time between half-past six and seven, and about an hour afterwards Mr Bolton

returned hastily, saying that he had forgotten an important letter he had to send by that morning's post, and that he had left Mr Hawkins grumbling at having to finish his round alone. Mr Bolton then went up to his own room, and five minutes later came back with a letter, which he carefully posted with his own hand just as the box was being cleared.

At half-past seven Colonel Hazel, strolling across the links, specially noticed there were no players to be seen. Ned Ryan went out at a quarter to eight o'clock to have a round by himself, having first asked Mr Bolton to join him. He had, as he stated, almost completed his round, when in the great, sandy bunker that guarded the seventeenth green he found Mr Hawkins stone dead.

He instantly gave the alarm, and Mr Beck and Mr Bolton were among the first on the scene. The detective, placid and imperturbable as ever, poked and pried about the body and the bunker where it lay. Mr Bolton was plainly broken-hearted at the sudden death of his life-long friend.

Beyond all doubt and question the man was murdered. There was a deep dint of some heavy, blunt weapon on the back of his head, fracturing the skull. But death had not been instantaneous. The victim had turned upon his assassin, for there were two other marks on his face—one an ugly, livid bruise on his cheek, and the other a deep, horrible gash on the temple from the same blunt-edged weapon. The last wound must have been instantly fatal. The weapon slew as it struck.

It was plain that robbery was not the motive of

the crime. His heavy purse with a score of sovereigns and his pocket-book full of bank-notes were in his pockets, his fine diamond pin in his scarf, and his handsome watch in his fob.

The watch had been struck and smashed, and, as so often happens in such cases, it timed the murder to a moment. It had stopped at half-past eight. It was five minutes after nine when Mr Ryan had given the alarm.

While all the others looked on in open-eyed horror, incapable of thought or action, Mr Beck's quick eyes found a corner of the bunker where the sand had been disturbed recently. Rooting with his hands as a dog digs at a rabbit burrow with his paws, he dug out a heavy niblick. The handle was snapped in two, and the sand that clung damply round the iron face left a dark crimson stain on the fingers that touched it.

No one then could doubt that the murderous weapon had been found.

Mr Beck examined it a moment, and a frown gathered on his placid face. "This is Mr Ryan's niblick," he said slowly.

The words sent a quiver of excitement through the crowd. All eyes turned instinctively to the face of the young Irishman, who flushed in sudden anger.

"It's a lie," he shouted, "my niblick is here." He turned to his bag which lay on the sward beside him. "My God! it's gone. I never noticed it until this moment."

"Yes, that is mine," he added, as Mr Beck held out the blood-stained iron for inspection. "But I swear I never missed it till this moment."

Not a word more was said.

The crowd broke up into groups, each man whispering suspicions under his breath. The whisperers recalled the recent quarrel between the men, and in every trifling circumstance clear proof of guilt was found. Only Mr Bolton stood out staunchly for the young Irishman, and professed his faith in his innocence.

Like a man in a dream Ned Ryan returned alone to the hotel, where an hour later he was arrested. On being searched after arrest a five-pound note with Hawkins' name on the back of it was found in his pocket, and his explanation that he had won it at golf provoked incredulous smiles and shrugs amongst the gossipers. Two days later a coroner's jury found a verdict of wilful murder against the young engineer.

There was a second sensation, in its way almost as exciting as the first, when it was found that the murdered man had willed the whole of his huge fortune unconditionally to Miss Margaret Hazel.

But the girl declared vehemently she would never touch a penny of it, never, until the real murderer was discovered. She had a stormy interview with Mr Beck, whom she passionately charged with attempts to fix the guilt on an innocent man. She made no secret now of her love for the young Irishman, to the horror of the respectable and proper people at the hotel, who looked forward with cheerful assurance to her lover's execution.

But the distracted girl cared for none of those things. She poured the vials of her wrath on Mr Beck.

" You pretended to be my friend," she said, " and then you did all in your power to hang the innocent man I love."

Mr Beck was soothing and imperturbable. " Nothing of the kind, my dear young lady. It is always my pleasant duty to save the innocent and hang the guilty."

" Then why did you find out that niblick? "

" The more things that are found," said Mr Beck, " the better for the innocent and the worse for the guilty."

" Oh! I'm not talking about that," she cried, with a bewildering change of front. " But here you are pottering about doing nothing instead of trying to save him. I will give you every penny poor Mr Hawkins left me if you save him."

Mr Beck smiled benignly at this magnificent offer. " Won't you two want something to live on? " he asked, " when I have saved him, and before he makes his fortune."

She let the question go by. " Then you will, you promise me you will! " she cried eagerly.

" I will try to assist the course of justice," he said, with formal gravity, but his eyes twinkled, and she took comfort therefrom.

" That's not what I want at all."

" You believe Mr Ryan is innocent? " asked Mr Beck.

" Of course I do. What a question! "

" If he is innocent I will try to save him—if not—"

" There is no ' if not.' Oh! I'm quite satisfied, and I thank you with all my heart."

She caught up the big, strong hand and kissed it, and then collapsed on the sofa for a good cry, while Mr Beck stole discreetly from the room and set out for a solitary stroll on the golf links, every yard of which he questioned with shrewd eyes.

He made one small discovery on the corner of the second green. He found a ball which had belonged to the murdered man. There was no doubt about the ownership. Mr Hawkins had a small gold seal with his initial cut in it. This he used to heat with a match to brand his ball. The tiny black letters, "S.H.," were burnt through the white skin of the new "Professional" ball, which Mr Beck found on the corner of the second green. He put the ball in his pocket and said nothing about his find.

But about another curious discovery of his he was quite voluble that evening at dinner. He found, he said, a peculiar-looking waistcoat button in the bunker that guarded the second green. It seemed to him to have been torn violently from the garment, for a shred of the cloth still clung to it.

"If I had found it in the bunker where the murder was committed," said Mr Beck, "I would have regarded it as a very important piece of evidence. Anyhow it may help. I will examine young Ryan's waistcoats to see if it fits any of them."

Then for a few days nothing happened, and excitement smouldered. People had no heart to play golf over the scene of the murder. The parties gradually dispersed and scattered homewards. Colonel Hazel, who had been completely broken up by the tragedy, was amongst the first to go.

Mag gave her address to Mr Beck, with strict

injunctions to wire the moment he had good news. "Remember, I trust you," were the last words she said as they parted at the hotel door.

Mr Bolton and Mr Beck were almost the two last to leave. The diamond merchant was disconsolate over the death of his old friend and comrade, and the detective did all in his power to comfort him.

One morning Mr Bolton had a telegram which, as he explained to Mr Beck, called him away on urgent business. He left that afternoon, and Mr Beck went with him as far as Liverpool, when they parted, each on his respective business.

. . . . . .

The next scene in the tragedy was staged in Holland.

Two men sat alone together in a first-class railway carriage that slid smoothly through a level landscape intersected with canals. They had put aside their papers, and talked and smoked. One of the men was plainly a German by his dress and manner—the other a Frenchman.

The Frenchman had tried vainly to stagger through a conversation in German and the German in French until they had found a common ground in English which both spoke well though with a strong foreign accent.

There had been an account of a big diamond robbery in the papers, and their talk drifted on to crimes and criminals of all countries—a topic with which the Frenchman seemed strangely familiar. He did most of the talking. The German sat back in his corner and grunted out a word or two of assent, to all appearance deeply interested in the talk.

Now and again a silver flask passed between the two men, who grew momentarily more intimate.

"Herr Raphael," said the Frenchman, "I am glad to have met you. You have made the journey very pleasant for me. You are a man I feel I can trust. I am not, as I told you, Victor Grandeau, a French journalist. I am plain Mr Paul Beck, an English detective, at your service."

With a single motion the shiny, sleek, black wig and the black moustache disappeared into a small handbag at his side. The whole character, and even the features of the face, seemed to change as suddenly, and the broad, bland, smiling face of our old friend Mr Beck presented itself to the eyes of the astonished German, who shrank back in his corner of the seat in astonishment at the sudden revelation. But Mr Beck quietly ignored his astonishment.

"As you seem interested in this kind of thing," he said, "I will tell you the story of one of the most curious cases I have ever had to deal with. You are the very first to hear the story. Indeed, it is so new that it hasn't yet got the right ending to it. Perhaps you have heard of the Thornvale murder in England? No! Then I'll begin at the beginning."

He began at the beginning and told the story clearly and vividly as it was told at the inquest. The German listened with most flattering interest and surprise.

"When I found that golf ball," Mr Beck went on, "it gave me an idea. Do you know anything of golf?"

"I play a little," the other confessed.

"Then you will understand that from the place

where I found his ball I knew that the murdered man —I told you his name was Hawkins—Samuel Hawkins—never got as far as the second green. If he had, his ball would not have been lying where I found it. He would have holed it out and gone on.

"It was plain, therefore, he must have been murdered just after he played that shot—murdered somewhere between the tee and the green of the second hole. I went back to the deep bunker I told you of that guarded the second green, and I found there traces of a struggle.

"They had been cunningly obliterated, but to a detective's eye they were plain enough. The sand was smoothed over the footprints, but here and there the long grass and wild flowers had been torn away by a desperate grasp. I even found a faint blood-stain on one of the stones. Then, of course, I guessed what had happened. The man had been murdered in the bunker of the second green and carried under cover of the ridge to the bunker of the seventeenth. That, you see, disposed of the alibi of Mr Bolton, who had left him early in the game."

"Oh, no!" interrupted the German, with eager interest in the story, "you told me that Mr Bolton was at the hotel from half-past seven, and the watch of the murdered man showed the murder had been committed at half-past eight."

Mr Beck looked at the German with manifest admiration. "Forgive me for mentioning it. You would have made a first-class detective if you hadn't gone into another line of business. I should have told you that the evidence of the watch had been faked."

"Faked!" queried the other, with a blank look on his face.

"Oh! I see. Being a German, of course you don't understand our slang phrases. I examined the watch, and I found that though the glass had been violently broken, the dial was not even scratched. The spring had been snapped, not by the blow but by overwinding. It was pretty plain to me the murderer had done the trick. He first put the hands on to half-past eight and then broke the spring, and so made his alibi. He got the watch to perjure itself. Neat, wasn't it?"

The German merely grunted. He was plainly impressed by the devilish ingenuity of the murderer.

"Besides," Mr Beck went on placidly, "to make quite sure, I laid a trap for Mr Bolton which worked like a charm. The night of the murder I went into his room and tore one of the buttons out of his waistcoat. The next day I mentioned at dinner that I had found a button in the second bunker where, if I guessed rightly, he and only he knew the murder was really committed. It was a lie, of course. But it caught the truth. That same evening Mr Bolton burnt the waistcoat. It was a light cotton affair that burnt like paper. The glass buttons he cut off with a knife and buried. That looked bad, didn't it?"

"Very bad," the German agreed. He was more deeply interested than ever. "Did you arrest the man, then?"

"Not then."

"But why?"

"I wanted to make quite sure of my proofs. I wanted to lay my hands on the receipts for the diamonds which I believed he had stolen. I told you of those, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes, you told me of those. Did you search for them?"

"Yes, but I couldn't find them. I searched Mr Bolton's room, and searched his clothes carefully, but I couldn't find a trace of the papers."

Again the German grunted. He seemed somehow pleased at the failure. Possibly the quiet confidence of this cock-sure detective annoyed him.

"But," Mr Beck went on, placid as ever, "I tried a guess. You may remember, Herr Raphael, that when Mr Bolton came back from the golf links he posted a letter immediately. I had a notion that he stuck the receipts in the envelope and posted it addressed to himself at some post-office to be left till called for. Wasn't a bad guess, was it?"

"A very good guess."

"Then I did a little bit of forgery."

"You what?"

"Did a little bit of forgery. I forged the name of Mr Bolton's partner to a telegram to say that five thousand pounds were urgently needed. That, I knew, was likely to make Mr Bolton gather up the receipts and start for Amsterdam. We went to Liverpool together and I changed to an elderly lady. I saw him as an able-bodied seaman pick up his own letter at the Liverpool Post-Office. I came over with him in the boat to Rotterdam. As a French journalist I saw him as a stout German get into this very carriage and—here I am!"

"He took a neat pair of handcuffs from his pocket and held them out with an ingratiating smile."

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It was a very lame ending to an exciting story. The stout German plainly thought so. He had listened with flattering eagerness almost to the end; now he leant back in the corner of his seat suppressing a yawn.

"It is a very amusing story," he said slowly. "But, my friend, you must be thirsty with much talking. I in my bag have a flask of excellent schnapps, you shall of it taste."

A small black bag rested on the seat beside him. He laid his hand on the fastening.

"It is no use," Mr Beck interrupted, "no use, Mr Bolton. I have taken the revolver out of the bag and have it with my own in my pocket. The game is up, I think. I have put my cards on the table. What do you say?"

Suddenly Mr Bolton broke into a loud, harsh laugh that ended in a sob. "You are a fiend, Beck," he shouted, "a fiend incarnate. What do you mean to do?"

"To take you back with me to London. I have a man in the next carriage to look after you. No use worrying about extradition. You have a return ticket, I suppose; so have I. There will be a train leaving as we arrive. Meanwhile, if you don't mind—" He took a neat pair of handcuffs from his pocket and held them out with an ingratiating smile.

Mr Bolton drew back a little. For a moment it seemed as if he would spring at the detective's throat. But the steady, fearless eyes held him. He put his hands out submissively and the steel bracelets clicked on his wrists.

They had only to cross the platform to reach the

return train that was just starting. But Mr Beck found time to plunge into the telegraph office and scribble three words to Mag Hazel's address:

"All right.—Beck."

VI

THE RAPE OF THE RUBY

"I WANT a room, not a rat-hole," said the Hon. Staunton Toleron angrily to the manager of the Hotel Cyril.

He had been offered a small room on the fifth floor with one window looking out on nowhere.

The manager, a short, stout, dark man with close-clipped whiskers and beady eyes, was all politeness. Plainly he did not want to offend an "Honourable," though a more dishonourable "Honourable" than Staunton Toleron could not be found in broad England. A handsome young fellow enough of the "dude" type, nose long, mouth weak, eyes light blue, chin and forehead slightly receding, hair parted smoothly in the centre, he looked the pigeon rather than the hawk.

His face was his fortune at the racecourse and the card-table, but of late his fortune had been somewhat out of joint. There were ugly rumours afloat, and men had become shy of playing or betting with the Hon. Staunton.

"I'm so sorry," said the manager, "but it's the best we can do for you; the place is crowded from the floor to the roof."

"Couldn't you put me somewhere that looks out

on to the river? I want a breath of air; I don't want to be roasted before my time."

"Yesterday we could have," said the manager; "to-day we cannot. Our last suite of rooms—about the best we have—were taken for Miss Betty Barry."

"But she's in Paris; she doesn't open at the Lyceum until Monday, and this is only Friday."

"She has taken the rooms in advance. She had them last time she was here, and she likes them, and she is a lady who doesn't let anything interfere with her liking. She will be here on Monday afternoon."

"Put me in till she comes, there's a good fellow. I know Betty; she is a pal of mine and a right good sort. I'm sure she wouldn't object. I hope to clear out before Sunday; but if I have to stay on I'll take the rat-hole when she comes. You can dock the cost of the rooms for three days from Miss Betty's bill."

The Hon. Staunton got his way, and also the handsomest suite in the hotel—bedroom, sitting-room and bathroom fronting the river.

The rooms were luxurious, and he was luxurious, so they suited each other. The big sitting-room was specially delightful. Every article in it, from the rich Turkey carpet that covered the centre of the room, to the spindle-shanked Sheraton chairs and tables that stood or slipped on the polished marqueterie round its edges, had a history—and a price.

For three days the Hon. Staunton made himself perfectly comfortable till the famous Betty Barry arrived to evict him. Naturally her coming made a

stir at the hotel. A lovely girl with the blue eyes, and black hair, and narrow, arched eyebrows of the true-born Celt, she had the two great qualities of the actress—genius and beauty. Together they are irresistible. The critics praised her, and the public worshipped her. The theatres she played in were always thronged out to the doors and up to the ceiling, and she held the audience in thrall to laugh or weep as she chose.

But it was neither her beauty nor her genius that made such a stir at the Hotel Cyril, but her jewels. They were a miraculous collection, and she wore them freely on all occasions, for Betty was not one of those fine ladies who send their jewels to their banker or pawnbroker and wear paste. Everything she wore was real. Assured of that beforehand, the ladies could admire without reserve.

Above all and beyond all there was the wonderful ruby never before seen in England.

This famous jewel had a history—a true, romantic and sensational history; a history that only just escaped being scandalous. A certain Crown Prince had fallen in love madly with the beautiful Betty when she played Juliet in his father's capital. There is no use raking up old scandals by repeating the names. His mad passion burst all bounds of discretion and decorum. He made no secret of his infatuation. He followed her everywhere; he offered her marriage, not even the morganatic imitation, but the genuine article.

The Royal father and mother, who had promised him to a discreet, steady and stolid young German princess, were distracted. But Betty Barry behaved

admirably. She told her Royal lover gently but firmly that she didn't love him and wouldn't have him. What's more, she made him see that she meant it. Then she good-humouredly coaxed him out of his folly; they parted the best of friends, and he went back obediently to his German princess.

"It is hard luck," he complained to his Royal mother. "If I were not a fool of a Crown Prince I might have a chance. But she won't have me, that's flat, and she is too good a sort to worry. I might as well cry for the moon. She is just as bright and as cold and as much above me, though I am a Crown Prince."

He did not say this in English, because he didn't know any English, but in the foreign equivalent that was spoken in his capital.

So the storm passed and the scandal was averted, and the beautiful actress was made much of at Court, and became the pet of an Empress who was amiable and kind-hearted, if a little eccentric.

"Good-bye, my dear," she said at a private audience, "I am half sorry my boy couldn't marry you. He'll have a dull time with his princess. I'd have had a dull time myself if it wasn't for fox-hunting. But I suppose it is all for the best. Anyway, you behaved just splendidly, and this will help you to remember an Empress who is very grateful."

It was then that she gave her the ruby—the matchless, priceless ruby, that half the female Royalties of Europe had envied. Of course there was an outcry. The Imperial ruby to a mere actress! It was a scandal—almost a sacrilege! But

the Empress was a woman used to her own way. The old Emperor, who was half in love with the beautiful Betty himself, let her have it; and so the actress carried the famous ruby back to London. No wonder the ladies of London were agog for a sight of it.

They had their wish. The very first night of her arrival at the Hotel Cyril, Betty Barry dined at the table-d'hote instead of, as was expected, in her own private room. She was in full evening dress—a rich brocaded poplin, brilliant with many jewels. A hundred sparks of coloured lights flashed on her dress and in her coal-black hair, and the ruby burned with a rosy, flickering fire on her bosom, outblazing them all. It was cut to the shape of a heart—the deep, rich red of pigeon's blood, warmed by an imprisoned fire.

It so happened that the Hon. Staunton, who had retired to the "rat-hole," sat beside her at dinner. He had known her before she was famous, and she never forgot old friends. She was delighted by his frank admiration of the heart-shaped ruby.

"Isn't it glorious!" she said, with the naïve delight of a child. "I have never seen a jewel so beautiful."

"It is peerless," said Staunton, "and I dare say priceless. Aren't you afraid of losing it or having it stolen?"

"Not in the very least," she cried gaily. "It is precautions that provoke thieves. I have never lost so much as a seed pearl. My maid I could trust with my life, not to speak of my jewels. Indeed, I'm to be pitied," she said with mock pathos. "A good jewel robbery is, as you know, the best advertisement

for an actress, and I cannot get anybody to steal mine."

"Don't quarrel with your good luck, Betty," cautioned the Hon. Staunton, with the gravity of the true gambler, "or it is bound to change."

It proved a prophecy. Next day her jewels were stolen—the famous, priceless ruby amongst them, and the Hon. Staunton Toleron was unpleasantly mixed up in the business.

It was Barbara Mullen, Betty's Irish maid, that gave the first alarm. She was wild with excitement, and her words tripped each other up as she poured out her story to the hotel manager.

The actress was accustomed, when possible, to dress for her part at the hotel, and drive in her brougham to the theatre ready to step on to the stage. While Barbara was engaged in laying out her dress the telephone bell rang, and her mistress' voice called her to the hall. She went down in the lift, locking the door after her. Her mistress was not in the hall. She went straight back to the room. A gentleman was just leaving the room as she got to the landing, and crossed her on his way to the lift. She found the door of her mistress' sitting-room was shut, but not locked.

The door and window of the bedroom were open, and the jewels, including the great ruby, were gone.

"What was the gentleman you met at the door like?" queried the hotel manager.

"Tall, fair, with a long, blonde moustache, and very handsome."

"The Hon. Staunton Toleron!" gasped the

manager. "Come, girl, we must find him at once." They found him at once, and without much difficulty. He was seated at a small table in the hall, reading a sporting paper and smoking a cigarette.

"Stand here and watch that he does not move," whispered the manager, "while I will go for Mr Nichols."

Mr Nichols, the private detective employed at the hotel, came back a moment later with the fussy little manager, to whom he made as sharp a contrast as a greyhound to a poodle. A typical detective was Mr Nichols—tall, gaunt, with a long face, clean-cut features and a pair of piercing eyes.

Together they came up quietly to Barbara, who was quivering with excitement. "He has not made a move," she said, "except to light another cigarette and turn over the paper."

Mr Nichols made a note in a little notebook shaped exactly like a matchbox. "In the working of a scientific problem, Mr Moulang," he said to the manager, "there is nothing small enough to be neglected."

"Will you arrest him?" whispered Mr Moulang.

"Not at first; I want to question him. Questions are not allowed after arrest. We can go to your private office, I suppose?"

Mr Moulang nodded.

"I shall want you and the girl later; wait here for a moment."

Mr Nichols crossed the hall carelessly and seated himself at the little table opposite the Hon. Staunton Toleron.

"Can you oblige me with a match?" he asked very politely.

As the Hon. Staunton leant across the table with a light, Mr Nichols looked him in the eyes and said softly: "I am a detective. I wish to have a private interview with you. Resistance is useless; I am armed." He touched his hip pocket dramatically.

The Hon. Staunton looked at him for a moment with blank bewilderment, that quickly gave place to amusement.

"You are not serious, old chap."

"Quite serious. Will you come quietly with me?"

"Why, certainly; lead on, Macduff!"

"Pardon me, you go first. Kindly follow Mr Moulang and that girl to his office."

"Always ready to follow a pretty girl. But I say, this is a rum joke."

"It is no joke, as you will soon find," retorted the other, sternly. "I assure you, sir, your levity is quite misplaced in the business, as I think this young lady will speedily convince you."

Staunton's face grew grave as he listened to the girl's story, but with no trace of anxiety or fear.

"Egad, this is serious," he said; "the ruby alone should be worth a big fortune. But how can I help?"

"The young lady says she saw you coming out of the room just before the robbery. Is that true?"

"Why, certainly. We crossed each other on the stairs. I mistook the room for my own. I said so as she passed."

"You did not mention that," said Mr Nichols sharply to the maid.

"I did not know what he said or meant," she faltered.

"Mr Moulang will know what I meant," said the Hon. Staunton. "I had occupied the room for some days before. I turned in quite mechanically at the open door as I passed."

"But the door was locked," interposed Mr Nichols.

"Pardon me, the door was open."

"You said you locked the door—didn't you?" The detective snapped the inquiry at Barbara.

"I'm almost sure I locked it," she faltered nervously.

"You were mistaken, miss, I assure you," remarked the Hon. Staunton, politely; "it was certainly open as I passed. I was thinking of something else as I turned the handle. But of course I recognised in a moment, when I saw the lady's things about, that the room was not mine."

"How long were you out of the room, madam?" demanded the detective.

"A minute I should think, perhaps two at the outside."

"That wouldn't give the thief much time," said the detective, grimly. There was a marked change in his manner when he turned again to Staunton. His tone was respectful, almost deferential. "You won't mind telling us, sir, where you went next?"

"Straight down in the lift to the table where you found me ten minutes later."

"I don't think we need trouble you further, Mr Toleron, for the present."

"Pardon me, Mr Nichols; this is a serious matter. The jewels, lost or stolen, are, as I happen to know, of fabulous value. I was most unfortunately in the rooms it seems just before they disappeared. I do not choose that any suspicion, however preposterous, should rest on me. I desire, before you make any further inquiries, that I shall be thoroughly searched."

Mr Moulang held up his hands in protest.

"He is right," said the detective. "It is only a formality, but it is a very expedient formality. Mr Moulang, will you kindly take the young lady to another room—and keep a close eye on her," he added in a whisper as the manager passed.

As might have been anticipated, nothing was found in the search which Staunton Toleron had insisted on. The evidence of the lift man and the waiter showed it was impossible that he could have got rid of the jewels.

He had gone down in the lift to the hall, and had not left the waiter's sight until Mr Nichols had come up to him.

In the hall he had taken a sheet of paper from his pocket-book, put it in an envelope, and handed it to the waiter to post. There was nothing in the envelope except the thin sheet of paper. Of that the waiter was quite certain.

Had the jewels been thrown through the window to an accomplice? That question, too, was quickly settled. There was a policeman stationed outside. He had been there for half an hour. He was quite

sure that no one had passed, and nothing had been thrown while he was there.

Rapidly and discreetly Mr Nichols made his inquiries, all leading straight to nothing. No one in the hotel, except the parties concerned, knew of the mysterious robbery, when Betty Barry, in her light run-about motor driven by herself, swept smoothly up to the hotel door.

The manager met her in the hall, consternation in his face.

"Miss Barry," he said, "I would wish a word with you in private."

Some instinct told her what had happened.

"My jewels," she whispered, "they have been stolen?"

He nodded dismally, and without another word she followed him to his private room.

Mr Nichols was there, self-contained and composed; the Hon. Staunton, eager and excited; poor Barbara Mullen, her arms on a table and her face on her arms, sobbed noiselessly.

Betty Barry walked straight to the girl, and patted her encouragingly on the shoulder.

"Don't cry, Barbara," she said, "don't cry; we'll find them yet."

But Barbara only sobbed on disconsolately.

As she turned from the girl, Betty found Mr Nichols' keen eyes fixed on her face. A sudden thought took her.

She faced him indignantly. "Has anyone," she cried, "dared to hint that Barbara took them?"

Her own loss seemed forgotten in her sympathy

with the girl. The pose of the great actress was splendid; her slim figure in its dark, close-fitting dress, drawn up to its full height, her blue eyes blazing, her finger pointing scornfully at the detective.

Mr Moulang started guiltily, for he and Mr Nichols had been whispering suspiciously, but the detective never moved a muscle.

"Perhaps you had better hear the facts first, Miss Barry," he said coolly.

"All right." She turned from him sharply, and again laid an encouraging hand on the shoulder of the girl. "Tell me, Barbara, how did it all happen?"

Mr Nichols would have interposed, but she silenced him with a look. "I will hear the girl first, if you please, sir."

Poor Barbara raised a tear-stained face, and told her story in incoherent sentences broken with sobs.

"Are you quite sure, my dear, you locked the door?" asked her mistress.

"I was quite sure at first, but I'm not now. How could he get into the room if I did!"

"It wasn't your fault anyway, so don't fret. Besides, something tells me it will come all right. I will get those jewels back again, never fear."

"Indeed, I hope so, with all my heart," broke in Staunton Toleron, fervently. "I'd give my right hand to recover them."

"It's very kind of you, Mr Toleron," said the actress, graciously, "but I should be sorry to take the exchange. Thanks all the same."

"Oh, don't thank me, Miss Barry. It's more for my own sake than yours. It is hateful to me to be mixed up in this business."

"But you are not mixed up in it."

"But I am. What will the world say? It is known I am a poor man. My character is not of the best; though no one, so far, has accused me of robbery. The evidence looks black enough against me. Don't you see it does?" Then he told his story, in no way cloaking or colouring the facts.

"It is quite impossible that Mr Toleron could have taken the jewels," said the unimpassioned voice of the detective.

"I don't need you to tell me that," retorted Betty Barry, petulantly. She had plainly taken a dislike to Mr Nichols.

But he went on placidly without the slightest notice of her irritation, checking the points off methodically on his long, thin fingers.

"We have never lost sight of Mr Staunton Toleron from the moment he left your room to the search on which he himself insisted. It is a matter of pure reason," he continued, "that the jewels must have gone by the window or the door. The policeman shows they did not go through the window; Mr Toleron proves they did not come with him through the door."

"Is that all?" said Miss Barry, curtly. "Then, I suppose, I may put in my word. Of course, I'm mad to lose my jewels, but I mean to have them back. The newspapers will be all crying out it's an advertisement. Now I don't want a fuss. I don't

want anyone to know about this except just our four selves. Can that be managed? "

Mr Moulang raised his eyes and hands in grateful relief. " If you so wish," he murmured.

" But Mr Nichols? " queried Miss Barry.

" Mr Nichols is employed by us," said Mr Moulang.

" Excuse me," said Mr Nichols, quietly, but firmly, too, " I have also a duty to the public. I must strive to find the thief."

" Do, do! " cried Miss Barry, impatiently, " if you can. I'll give a thousand pounds to whomever finds him. I don't want to stop you. I only want things to be done quietly. A fuss won't help you—will it? Catch the thief quietly, and I will pay a thousand pounds when you catch him."

" Him or her? " queried Mr Nichols.

Her eyes blazed at him. For an instant she looked as if she were going to break out in a whirlwind of passion, but she pulled herself together. " Or her," she said as quietly as himself. " Here, I will put it in writing." She scribbled a few lines at Mr Moulang's desk, and thrust it at Mr Nichols. " Will that do? Very well, I understand you will hold your tongue till the jewels are found."

" The jewels and the thief. You have my word of honour."

He put the scrap of paper carefully in his pocket-book, and left the room.

" But what about me? Where do I come in? " asked Mr Toleron.

" Oh, you're all right," said the actress. " People can't talk if they don't know."

" They can sometimes. But honestly, Miss Barry, I hope you don't believe I had anything to do with this business? "

" How absurd. Of course not." She gave him her hand frankly. " I'll prove it to you. I want you to do something for me now at once. You know the Duchess of Southern? "

" A great friend of mine."

" And of mine. It is a coincidence that a few days ago we were talking about jewels and robberies, and she insisted on giving me the name of a man whom she said was miraculous. I have it in my purse somewhere."

From a jumble of miscellaneous rubbish in her purse she fished out a little scrap of crumpled paper, and smoothed it out with a forefinger on her palm. " Here is the name—Paul Beck, Montague Street. I haven't the number—can you find him, do you think? "

" Quite easily. What am I to do with him when found? "

" Bring him straight back here. Now see how I trust you. If I had the very faintest suspicion I wouldn't ask you to get a rod to beat yourself. I wouldn't send you for Mr Beck."

" I shall not forget your kindness. Some time I may have a chance to repay it. I trust sincerely that this man Beck will find the jewels and the thief."

" Bring him to my room when you get him. I'm going there now with Barbara."

When the door closed behind the two girls, Betty Barry's self-possession collapsed as if an over-

strained something had snapped in her brain. She plumped down in a cushioned chair and laughed hysterically.

"I cannot help it, Barbara," she gasped, dabbing her eyes with a wisp of cambric. "Another minute and I would have broken down and disgraced myself. There was that old fraud of a detective posing and prosing like a man in a story-book, and that woebegone Mr Toleron imploring me not to suspect him, and the plump little manager fussing about his hotel. The whole thing was a screaming farce."

"But your jewels, miss, your beautiful, lovely jewels!"

"I cannot somehow realise that they are gone. I suppose I'll be very sorry for them later on. But I don't and I won't believe they are gone for ever. I feel quite certain they will come back again; don't you?"

She sprang the question on her so suddenly that Barbara coloured and looked confused. "You know best, miss," she faltered.

"I! I know no more than you do. Would you insinuate, Barbara, that I stole them myself? Oh, fie for shame, you naughty girl!"

Then suddenly the girl's mood changed, and her laughter broke without warning into sobbing. "My beautiful, beautiful ruby!" she wailed. "I'll never, never see it again!"

"But you said just now—" Barbara began.

"No matter what I said just now. Haven't I a right to cry as well as you, I'd like to know? You shouldn't have been so careless, Barbara. No, no,

I don't mean that. Don't whimper, my dear girl, it wasn't your fault. There's no use in crying after lost rubies. Besides, I've got to dress for the theatre. I will have to go on without my ruby to-night. Well, I shall know for certain if it is my acting or my jewels they go to see; that's one comfort. What did you say were taken, Barbara? "

" Only the diamond necklace and earrings, and the ruby."

" Only! indeed! The thief took the pick of the basket. But I have a few sparkles left yet, thank goodness. I'll wear my emeralds to-night." Then, as she turned and caught sight of her tear-stained face in the big glass, " Oh, I say, Barbara, what a fright I look! "

A sharp knock at the door jerked her up suddenly.

Barbara moved to open it.

" One moment," her mistress cried. She dipped her face into cold water, patted it dry with a soft towel, poured a little pool of eau de Cologne into the hollow of her right palm, brought her hands together with a splash, and dabbed her eyes and her forehead. Then, while she patted the disordered little ripples of hair back into their places, she called out to Barbara: " Now! "

She was at the door herself as soon as Barbara—cool, easy and completely self-possessed.

" Mr Beck, I am sure," she said, and gave her hand graciously to the stout, good-humoured-looking man who stepped shyly into the room. " Oh, you're not a bit like what I expected, Mr Beck! "

"I never am," said Mr Beck, enigmatically, "that's where the surprise comes in."

"The Duchess of Southern says you are so clever."

"So lucky," corrected Mr Beck. "Detective's work is like any other work, common sense and good luck will pull you through most times. Don't you think so, Mr Nichols?" he said, turning to the other detective, who had come in noiselessly after him.

"Certainly not," Mr Nichols retorted sharply. "I prefer and practise the analytic method myself."

"All right," responded Mr Beck, good-humouredly, "everyone to his taste as the dairymaid said when she kissed her cow. You like analysis and I like luck."

While he was chatting good-humouredly his sharp eyes took snapshots of the room and the people in it.

"Furniture changed while you were out?" he said to Barbara.

"No, sir."

"Sure you locked the door? Mr Toleron told me something of the case as we came along."

"I was sure at first, but—"

"Why did you change your mind, my girl?"

"Because Mr Toleron found it open as he passed."

Mr Beck, making no comment, moved across to the bedroom door. "May I?" he asked, addressing the actress.

"Why, certainly, she answered, and herself turned the handle of the door to let him pass.

"Lots of jewels left," he said, fumbling among the cases.

"Yes, but the best are gone."

"So Mr Toleron told me; the matchless ruby and some diamonds—a small handful in all."

"But a very precious handful, Mr Beck."

"My dear young lady, I know that. But why didn't the thief take more? Why didn't Aladdin fill his pockets full when he got into the cave?"

"Because he hadn't time."

"A good shot, Miss Barry, but it hasn't quite hit the mark. He might grab half a dozen cases almost as quickly as one. Halloa! what's this!" He had passed his hand over the outside sill of the open window, and in the far corner his fingers closed upon a key. A touch might have swept it into the street, but Mr Beck's fingers were quick to grip and hold.

It proved to be the key of a room door, with a tag of metal attached, and a number engraved on the tag.

"The key that I lost, no doubt," cried Betty Barry. "Didn't I tell you, Barbara, I lost the key of my room two days ago? Brought it with me to the theatre; must have dropped it in my dressing-room or on the stage. I left orders it should be hunted for."

Just a shadow of disappointment crossed Mr Beck's face, too swift and faint to notice. He examined the key closely for a moment, ignoring the hand held out for it.

"Yes, I suppose it must be mine," she said, looking at the number when at last he passed it to

her. "But how in wonder's name did it come there?"

"That's what we have to find out," said Mr Beck, oracularly.

"If I can be of any help," interposed the Hon. Staunton.

"Perhaps you may be later on. Meanwhile I'd like a word with Mr Moulang. Good-evening, Miss Barry, and don't despair of seeing your jewels again," he said as he left the room.

"The man's a fraud," said Mr Nichols to Staunton Toleron as the door closed upon the rival detective. "My dear sir, he knows as much about this business as you do."

"Oh, I hope not," retorted Staunton, "I know too much about it for my own peace of mind."

"I believe in Mr Beck," said Betty Barry, gravely. "Good-evening, Mr Toleron; good-evening, Mr Nichols. I've got to dress in ten minutes."

"You'll remember," said Mr Beck as he shook hands with Mr Moulang at parting, "just one line to me when any person specially wants those rooms after Miss Barry has left them, and not a syllable to anyone except me."

A few days later Betty Barry called at Mr Beck's office.

"I hope I haven't put you on the wrong track, Mr Beck," she said, "or off the right one. My door key has just been discovered in Ophelia's grave at the theatre. So you see it couldn't have been mine you found on the window-sill."

"Oh, I knew that, of course," said Mr Beck.

"Then why didn't you say so?"

She glanced at him for a moment with sharp suspicion, but he smiled his imperturbable smile. "I thought it better not at the time."

"What are you doing about the jewels?" she asked after a pause.

"Nothing."

"Nothing, Mr Beck!" she cried in surprise. "Then have you given up in despair?"

"Not in the least, my dear Miss Barry. I'm just waiting for someone to show me where the jewels are hidden."

"How long do you propose to wait?"

"Until my guide turns up."

It was only a fortnight later that Mr Moulang telephoned to Mr Beck that the rooms were taken, and within ten minutes Mr Beck's hansom was at the hotel door. His dialogue with Mr Moulang was brevity itself.

"Who is your guest?"

"The Duke of Waldshire."

"You are sure it is he?"

"Certain."

"Then good-bye till the next time. He is not my guide to the jewels." The visit lasted thirty seconds by the clock.

The next time the guest was a young American millionaire, Bertram D. Corcoran, who had come across from Paris. It was his first visit to England, and he was very particular about his rooms. He had seen half a dozen suites before he made his choice.

"Is he your guide?" asked Mr Moulang, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice as he gabbled his news in guttural English.

"Don't know till I try. Can you give me a place here as a waiter for a day or so?"

"Certainly. You want to—"

"Look after Mr Bertram D. Corcoran; to take care that he is quite comfortable. I'll be back in half an hour."

The man that came back in half an hour with a light overcoat over his well-kept dress suit was like Mr Beck and yet quite different. A man who knew Mr Beck very well would say: "What an extraordinary resemblance," but he would never be tempted to confuse the two. The features were alike, but in the expression and manner there was not a suggestion of resemblance.

This was an unmistakable waiter, who had been all his life a waiter. The deft movements of his hands, the gliding walk, the smile insinuating and deferential, all proclaimed him to the manner born.

Mr Moulang presented the newcomer to the head waiter. "An outsider, Jenkins," he said. "I've been asked to give him a trial. I want you to let him wait on our last American arrival, Mr Corcoran."

Jenkins frowned and growled. He had marked the American millionaire for his own particular quarry. But the new hand was so good-humoured, so civil, so efficient that he soon emerged from his sulk.

Mr Corcoran dined out, and returned, after the theatre, to supper, and the new hand waited upon him with respectful assiduity.

Mr Corcoran professed himself well pleased with his repast, only the green Chartreuse, which he tossed

off at a gulp, had a peculiar taste he thought. When the waiter brought him a second glass he found the same taste still, but less marked. He gave the waiter half a crown, directing that he should be called at six next morning, and Mr Beck pocketed the coin without a twinge of conscience.

"Tell the boots to knock hard until I answer," said Mr Corcoran, as he tossed the napkin on the back of his chair and lit a cigarette, "I'm a heavy sleeper."

"Well," said Mr Moulang, when he met Mr Beck an hour later, "what do you propose to do next?"

"Burglary," said Mr Beck, laconically. "I want the key of his room."

"But," expostulated Mr Moulang, "I really do not see how I can. After all, there is nothing so far as I know against Mr Corcoran. He is a guest at our hotel, and if you—"

He stammered and came to a full stop. It was not easy to put his suspicions into words.

Mr Beck helped him out. "Mr Moulang," he said gravely, "I'm acting on a certainty. But I see you've got to safeguard your hotel and your guests. Will you be satisfied if Mr Nichols comes with me?"

Mr Moulang eagerly welcomed this way out of his difficulty.

"Then send for Mr Nichols," said Mr Beck.

But Mr Nichols made difficulties of his own. With his keen eyes on Mr Beck's face he listened to his suggestion; his sharp, clean-shaven face imperturbable as a mask. Only the tight-closed lips twitched with a scornful smile.

"I don't like it," he said quietly when Mr Beck had finished. "It is too crude and amateurish for

my taste. Besides, I'm quite certain that this man Corcoran has nothing to do with the theft. By analytic reasoning I have already, by a process of exhaustion, fixed the identity of the real thief."

Mr Beck was modestly persistent. "Give me a chance," he pleaded. "I hope to find the clue to the mystery in Mr Corcoran's pockets. If I am wrong there is no harm done, and you are at liberty to call me a fool."

Mr Nichols consented under protest. He thought a lesson would do Mr Beck no harm.

"But if Mr Corcoran should wake?" he suggested.

"He won't wake," said Mr Beck, confidently, "he's a very heavy sleeper. I heard him say so himself."

Mr Nichols caught his meaning. "Drugged!" he whispered in amazement. "You take heavy risks, Mr Beck."

"There are no risks in the game when you hold the right cards," said Mr Beck, philosophically, "besides, my luck always pulls me through."

Mr Nichols smiled scornfully, but made no further comment. "If you're ready," he said, "I am."

The two detective burglars slipped off their shoes while Mr Moulang watched the proceedings in bewildered terror.

Fortunately the hotel was not full. By one o'clock in the morning there was no one stirring in the corridor. Mr Beck fitted the key to the door and pushed softly, but it refused to open. "There is something against the door, Nichols," he whispered to his brother burglar. "Slip your hand through and push it gently aside." Nichols' long arm went through the opening and he pushed gently. The next moment

there was a crash of breaking crockery. A chair had been put against the door, and the water-jug set on the chair's edge.

Mr Beck instantly shoved the door open, overturning the chair, and drew Mr Nichols with him into the room.

Then he listened eagerly for a step or sound in the corridor. There was none. The tick, tick of a clock on the chimney-piece, and the soft snoring of Mr Corcoran in the inner room, like the cooing of an unseen pigeon, alone broke the silence.

Mr Beck switched on the electric lamps and flooded the room with sudden light.

"First to clear up the rubbish," he said, and stooped to gather the bits of delf from the carpet.

Mr Nichols fumed at the delay. "Cannot we get to our task at once," he said, "and be done with it? I have no liking for this business."

"I want our friend when he wakes up to find things as he left them," Mr Beck explained respectfully. "It may prevent trouble. While I carry off these bits of delf with me and get another water-jug you might go through his pockets, if you don't mind."

Silent as a cat Mr Beck crept out through the open door, and presently returned with a water-jug which he had purloined from an empty room on the same corridor. Meanwhile, Mr Nichols, who had carried Mr Corcoran's clothes out from the bedroom, went through the pockets with methodical dexterity.

He noted the contents of each pocket in a little notebook as he set them on the table in order that everything he took out might be properly replaced.

When his task was completed he turned somewhat contemptuously to Mr Beck.

"Where's your clue now?" he asked.

The contents of the pockets were of the most commonplace description. There was a plain, heavy gold watch and guard, a leather purse with gold and silver coins in it, a gold cigarette-case and an amber holder, and a dark green morocco leather pocket-book with a number of notes neatly folded. The only one thing out of the common was a little ivory tape measure.

"This is what I expected," Mr Beck said complacently, touching the tape measure with a stout forefinger. "Are there no papers?"

"Not a scrap, except the bank-notes."

"Ah!" said Mr Beck, "let me see." He carefully unfolded the notes. In the fold of the third he found a sheet of thin blue paper with an irregular cross in red ink extending almost the whole length and breadth of the sheet, thus:

There was no other mark of any kind on the paper.

"That's not much use to you," sneered Mr Nichols.

Mr Beck did not seem to hear him. He was staring intently at the cross. All the good-humoured easiness was gone from his face; his lips were tightly closed; his brows were drawn together in concentrated thought. His keen eyes wandered restlessly round the room, the furniture, ceiling, carpet, seeking an inspiration.

For the first time Mr Nichols caught a glimpse of the real Mr Beck.

The tension suddenly relaxed. Mr Beck breathed a deep breath of relief, as a man who has solved at last a tantalising problem. The tape measure lay on the table at his hand. He pulled out the tiny ribbon and measured the long arm of the cross on the paper —exactly ten inches, the shorter eight inches.

Then he turned sharply to Mr Nichols. "Be quick," he said. "Measure that carpet."

There was no deference in his tone now; he spoke in curt command.

Mr Nichols meekly accepted the situation. He was beginning to feel foolish. At last he recognised his master.

"Twenty feet by sixteen," he said, when he had completed the measurement.

"Half-inch scale," muttered Mr Beck to himself.

He took the tape measure from the passive hand of Mr Nichols, who looked on wonderingly, and measured each of the four sections of the cross. Then he measured by scale the cross on the carpet, allowing two feet for the inch, and so found the lines corresponding to the lines on the paper, and the point of intersection.

"Here," he said, pressing his thumb on the exact spot, and with his shoulder pushing away an easy-chair that stood over it.

Down he went on all fours with his eyes close to the carpet.

"Give me the magnifying-glass," he said. Mr Nichols fetched it. Even with the strong glass Mr Beck's keen eyes could hardly detect an angular

slit cut with a razor edge—a mere hair line in the thick carpet. At the point of the angle there was the pinhead of a tiny tack that kept the tongue of carpet in its place.

Mr Beck prised the little tack out with the blade of his pocket-knife, lifted the angular flap, and exposed some inches of the naked floor with what looked like a circular scratch on the polished wood.

"Neat!" said Mr Beck with professional appreciation of fine workmanship. He inserted the sharp-pointed corkscrew of his pocket-knife in the wood and whipped out a circular bit with a plop like a plug from a jar.

A long horsehair which had been bent by the wood came up through the hole. Mr Beck took it gingerly between his finger and thumb and drew out a small silk bag from which he spilt out on the carpet the big ruby heart and a string of diamonds that blazed splendidly in the glow of the electric light.

Mr Nichols looked on, in envious, bewildered admiration. "Shall we arrest him at once?" he whispered. "It's a clear case."

"Not so clear as you think," said Mr Beck. "How can we connect Mr Corcoran, who has only just arrived, with the jewellery found in the bedroom floor? But why did he want to be called at six this morning? Now let me think."

As a result of his thoughts he put the bag back into the hole, pressed the button of wood down on the protruding horsehair, and tacked the slip of carpet over it.

"You are satisfied," he said to Mr Nichols, "that we have found the jewels anyway?"

"And caught the thief," suggested Mr Nichols.

"Not quite," replied Mr Beck, "but we may presently. I will bait the trap."

"Now," he said, "we will tell Mr Moulang how far we have got."

Mr Moulang was intensely excited. He wanted to arrest Mr Corcoran at once, but Mr Beck explained they had not a scrap of evidence against him. "I'm going out to look for some," he explained. "You needn't wait up for me; good-night."

When he was gone Mr Nichols was good enough to explain to Mr Moulang that it was sheer, blind, blundering luck that carried Mr Beck through in defiance of all recognised scientific methods.

In about an hour's time Mr Beck returned to the hotel, and again he crept up silently to the door behind which the unconscious Mr Corcoran still slept the deep sleep so kindly provided for him. Mr Beck entered this time alone, and without trouble replaced the chair at the door and balanced the water-jug on its edge. Then ensconcing himself behind the silk window curtains, through which he cut a small slit with his knife, he leant his shoulder against the wall and went quietly to sleep on his feet.

A slight tap at the outer door awakened him at once, but there was no sound in the bedroom. The tap grew to a clamorous knocking. Still no movement from Mr Corcoran. Just as Mr Beck was beginning to fear he had made the dose too strong, his mind was relieved by the welcome sound of a yawn, followed by a sleepy cry "All right."

The next moment Mr Corcoran in his pyjamas appeared in the sitting-room, rubbing his half-closed

eyes in which heavy sleep still lingered. Lifting off the water-jug he pushed the chair from the door and took in his boots and hot water.

"Down to breakfast in an hour," he said to the boots, and locked the door again and replaced the chair and jug. Then returning to his bedroom he threw up the window silently and coughed into the street.

Mr Beck, with ears strained like a hare's to the cry of far-off dogs, heard a faint echo of Mr Corcoran's cough from below.

With grim amusement, Mr Beck watched him take the sheet of blue paper from his pocket and repeat his own performance—measure the paper and the floor, lift the flap of carpet, and draw the bag of jewels from its hiding-place.

But as his hands closed on the treasure he was gripped from behind, drawn gently backwards from his knees to the flat of his back on the carpet, where he lay gazing up in helpless bewilderment at the good-humoured face of Mr Beck.

"Game is up," said Mr Beck, "hand over"—and without waiting for permission he took the bag of jewels from the nerveless hand of the prostrate Corcoran.

"Now tell me who is in this game with you?" said Mr Beck, pleasantly.

"See you hanged first," growled the other.

"Perhaps I know," suggested Mr Beck.

"Perhaps you don't! Here goes to warn him!" The man's muscles stiffened and he half rose to his feet, gripped Mr Beck, who leant over him, by the collar, and strove by a sudden effort to throw him

off his balance. Muscle strained against muscle for a moment. Then Mr Corcoran's head went down with a bump on the carpet, a knee pressed heavily on his chest, and a sponge steeped in chloroform was squeezed tightly upon his lips and nostrils.

For a moment he struggled fiercely. His hands struck out in all directions, and his heels thudded on the soft carpet. But the struggle was soon over, and he lay limp on the floor.

Mr Beck put a forefinger to his pulse. "All right in half an hour," he said, "much simpler and safer than handcuffs and gag. Now for the other."

With the bag of jewels in his hand he crossed into the bedroom. The lower part of the window was curtained; but through the curtain Mr Beck could dimly distinguish the figure of a tall woman in the street below.

He raised the window and coughed a very echo of Corcoran's cough. There was an instant answer from the street, and the figure which had been slowly pacing up and down stopped right under the window.

Then Mr Beck did a very strange thing indeed. He thrust his hand with the bag in it out the full length of his arm, and let the precious parcel drop into the street.

The figure below caught it smartly, thrust it into a side pocket, and disappeared at a quick pace round the corner, to be brought up suddenly in the arms of a big policeman.

"No use struggling, sir," said the constable with a grin, as he slipped the handcuffs dexterously on the wrists of his wriggling prisoner; "don't want to hurt a lady, Mr Toleron, but I must do my duty. I arrest

you for the robbery of the Barry jewels, which are at this moment concealed on your person."

. . . . . .

"Of course, I guessed from the first who did the trick," said Mr Beck next day to Betty Barry.

He had shown her the nest in which her jewels had lain, and they were having afternoon tea together—a favourite meal of Mr Beck—in the same room. The ruby heart lay on the table beside her. She wanted to be sure, she said, that she had got it safe back again.

"I guessed," he went on, "but I wasn't quite sure. I might have suspected the girl if she had not said she locked the door. You see, if she had stolen the jewels she would have been quite sure to have left the door open to turn suspicion from herself. But, putting the girl out of the question, the facts pointed like a sign-post to the Hon. Staunton. He took the room to get ready the hiding-place, and to have a duplicate key made. I knew I would find that key in the room, for he dared not take it out with him to be discovered when he was searched. The fact that you had lost a key was a coincidence that might have drawn a red herring across the track, but the true scent of the fox was too strong. As it was, it served to make the thief over-confident and reckless.

"I knew that the jewels must be safe somewhere in one of the two rooms, but I hadn't the least notion which or where. So I waited for the thief's confederate to come and show me, and bring me the map of the hiding-place Toleron had posted to him. Afterwards, when I found a particularly tall lady

loitering outside the window, the game was quite plain, and I had only to play up to the lead. That's the whole story."

"Not quite, Mr Beck. I have yet a small part to play in the piece. I don't know how to thank you enough. I am afraid to guess the value of the jewels you have given me back when they were quite lost. I want you to name your own fee."

"Another cup of tea, if you please, and a little more sugar," said Mr Beck.

VII

THE SHIP'S RUN

It began this way. She dropped her purse and he caught it as it fell. Don't run away with the notion that this was the starting point of a romance, for though the lady was young and pretty there was a wedding ring on her finger, and the man was stout, sedate and middle-aged.

They were standing together on the upper promenade deck of the great ship *Titanic* as she slid in the grey dusk, a softly-moving island, in and out through the multitudinous shipping of New York harbour. A soft mist was over the sea and the sky, stealing away their colour. The huge statue of Liberty stood up from the smooth floor of the sea like a fine grey etching against the fainter grey of the sky. High up in the lifted hand of the great figure the beacon flared red through the haze. The dawn grew slowly—the mist changed from grey to white, from dark to light. There was a luminous splash of brightness in the clouds to the east, and without warning the blood-red rim of the sun showed over the water.

It was at that instant that pretty Mrs Eyre dropped her purse as she leant over the rail, and Mr

Rhondel, with a snap like a swooping hawk, caught it a yard from her hand.

"Cricket!" he explained, as he restored it to the fair owner.

"Thanks," she said; "you're real smart. There were five hundred dollars in that purse on their way to the bottom of the sea, when you chipped in and caught it. Say, isn't that just fine!"—she waved a small hand admiringly at the red sun—"guess he knows how to wake things up rather."

"Going over for the first time?" said Mr Rhondel, ignoring the opportunity of discussing the sun's capabilities.

"First time, Bob and I, to the old country."

"You're Irish, then?"

It was a bold shot. The girl—she was hardly a woman—was typically American, tall, slim, graceful, carrying her head well: and her voice had a faint twang of the American drawl, which is pleasant from pretty lips. But the shot was straight, all the same, and went home. The eyes of forget-me-not blue deepened to violet.

"Am I Irish? Why, sure; and Bob, too. My grandfather by the mother's side came over in the forties. But Bob is Irish all the way through, from his toe-nails to his top-knot. There goes the bugle for breakfast. Come along; we'll get together, we three. I'll fix it all right with the steward; you'll like my boy."

She fixed it all right, and Mr Rhondel sat beside her at the bounteous breakfast-table. Beyond her, on the other side was her "boy"—a handsome, clean-shaven young fellow of twenty-five.

"Where have you been, Kitty? I've waited a minute and a half, and I'm as hungry as a hawk."

He dexterously peeled a big apple as he spoke.

"Seeing the sun up," Kitty exclaimed, "and carelessly dropping my purse over the rails."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right; don't worry. Mr Rhondel, here, caught it as it fell. This is Bob, Mr Rhondel—Bob Eyre, my husband; you can shake hands behind my back."

She drew herself straight and close to the table, and they shook hands behind her back, Mr Eyre with an admiring wink at the shapely little poll on which the coils of glossy, red-brown hair were piled.

"Try a kippered herring, Mr Rhondel," said Bob, "with tenderloin steak to follow—best thing to begin breakfast with. Sole for you, Kitty?"

They chatted freely all through the long breakfast, and by the time it was over they were old friends. Mr Rhondel manœuvred his deck chair close to Mrs Eyre, making no secret of his admiration. Bob Eyre sauntered off to play deck quoits. There was quicksilver in the young fellow's blood. He could not sit still for a moment; brain and muscle were full of restless vitality that craved incessant exertion and excitement.

Life on board soon settled down to a routine. On the third day out the same hour found Mrs Eyre and Mr Rhondel seated on their deck chairs close together, and Mr Eyre playing shuffle-board.

"May I smoke?" said Mr Rhondel.

"Why, certainly. I love a cigar in another person's mouth; don't smoke myself, not a cigarette even; don't like it."

She carefully found her place in her book, and then set it face down on the rug that Mr Rhondel had tucked cosily around her.

"You are the great South African millionaire, aren't you, Mr Rhondel?"

"So they say."

"Oh, you need not get riled. I wanted to give you a word of warning; there's cardsharpers aboard. I coaxed it out of the doctor. They plucked so many pigeons the last few voyages that now the company has a detective to watch them. The doctor wouldn't or couldn't tell me which was the detective. I guess myself it is the curate, the Rev. Abel Lankin."

"Surely not!" said Mr Rhondel.

"Well, I suspect him. He looks too innocent to be natural. Look at him now with the fool woman over there. Isn't he a pretty buttercup? Well, I hope he'll catch the cheats, anyway."

Mr Rhondel hoped so, too, and then their talk drifted lazily from one subject to another as the great vessel—the largest and fastest passenger boat afloat—slid smoothly through the waves.

Mrs Eyre was sudden and frank as a child in her friendship. She told him all about herself, and all she knew about her husband.

"I worked the 'phone in New York," she confided. "My folk could have kept me at home, but I wouldn't. Bob was a conductor on the street cars

when I met him; he was an inspector when I married him. We went to Niagara for the honeymoon and concluded the celebration in the Manhattan Hotel till the dollars ran out. We had fixed it up to live in New York, and we were on the look-out for a flat when the news came that started us homewards."

"What news?" said Mr Rhondel, as he lit a cigar carefully all round from the glowing stump which he tossed overboard into the froth of waves. This frank-spoken little woman interested him. It was not mere politeness that prompted the question.

"Oh, you have got the soft end of the talk this time. It is easy to say: 'Well, what's the news?' It's not so easy to answer you slick. I'm not clear about it myself; I doubt if Bob is. I had to get the story out of him in bits, like the kernel out of a walnut, and some stuck. He was a landlord once over in Ireland. But there wasn't a cent in the job. His income was considerably less than nothing a year when he started for the States, leaving his lawyer in charge of the mortgages.

"He often told me he was the first man of his breed that had ever earned a cent. Then the British Congress passed some Act or another to boom real property, and Bob's land came in on the top of the boom. I don't know what happened. The tenants bought the land, and the State paid for it, and they paid him a bonus for selling at a big price.

"Then the State Legislature, the Senate, House of Lords, or the King of England for all I know, bought Bob's castle and demesne lands, and sold them back

to Bob for less than was paid for them, and made him a free gift of the balance. It was all set out in the lawyer's letter; and I couldn't understand a word of it, but the end was plain enough. Bob had fifty thousand pounds clear out of the deal, and the old castle was waiting for him on the other side.

" 'We'll take on the job, Kitty,' he said to me; 'you'll like it and I'll like it. I always got on well with the boys, though we had our little differences about rent. I reckon they'll be glad to have me back, and Mrs Kitty Eyre will make the county folk sit up. Between us we'll set things humming. Fifty thousand pounds is a fortune in Ireland. I'll give the boys a lead in farming. There's money to be made out of land if one knows how to make it. We'll start a poultry farm and dairy farm. I'll give you your choice, Kitty, and I'll lay a hundred dollars I beat you on the year's return.' I took him up. I've backed the chicken coop against the milk pails, and I mean to win, sure."

Just then Bob Eyre in grey flannels and bright-yellow, rubber-soled shoes came sauntering up, flushed with his efforts at shuffle-board—a fine, shapely cut of a man, with a figure that showed breeding like a thoroughbred horse: light on his feet, and agile in his motions as a cat.

As he reached his wife he opened a shapely hand and showed a fistful of money, silver and gold.

" Won it with the shovel," he explained. " The other chap fancied himself more than a bit."

He dropped down on the deck close to his wife's feet, and pushed his tweed cap back from a tangle of crisp curls.

"I'll make another bit," he said, "before we touch land; you see if I don't. Play poker, sir?" he said, turning abruptly to Mr Rhondel.

"Sometimes," said Mr Rhondel, smiling at a pleasant reminiscence. "Do you?"

"Rather, only in a small way up to this—half-dollar rise and five-dollar limit. I take it a gentleman should never risk more than he can pay when the last hand is played. But I'd like to have a chance of a real game. I fancy I'd sweep the board."

"Why don't you?" asked Mr Rhondel, carelessly.

"Cannot. The captain has forbidden big play. He's a sportsman all right himself—says he's very sorry, but company's orders must be carried out. There's a 'tec on board—a whipper-snapper chap, rigged out as a sky pilot, nosing round. Old Colonel Rollin pointed him out to me when I hinted at a game. 'No use, my boy, when that chap's around,' he said. 'Eyes like a ferret.'"

"I'm real glad, Bobsie," his wife interposed, "the big game is barred. I know you. You'd bet the fifty thousand pounds on a pair if you thought the man next you was bluffing, and you'd laugh when he raked in the pool on a straight flush."

"Give us a chance, little one, I'm not that sort. Besides, it's my last hope of a flutter. I have promised never to bet more than five dollars on any game after we touch Old Ireland, and you know I'm a man of my word."

Miss Phœbe Everly passed at this moment—a

genuine Gibson girl, with superlative curves and restless activity.

"Lazy!" she threw the word back at Bob Eyre as she passed, and he leapt instantly to his feet at the challenge.

"Have a game of shuffle-board?" he retorted.

"No, come for a smart walk instead. I want to ask you something."

She nodded a gay little nod to Kitty and carried him off.

"Well?" he said when they were half up the promenade deck, "what's your question? If it is *the* question, I cannot—I'm married already."

"Don't trouble on my account. I'll never take a hand in that gamble. I want you to tell me what they mean by 'a bit on the run.'"

"Don't know."

"Then find out like a good boy. I heard old Colonel M'Clure talking to Pop at lunch a lot of stuff about the day's run and the auction of the numbers and the high field and the low field. But when I asked him what it meant he told me to run away and play, it wasn't good for little girls to know everything. So I want to find out just to spite him."

"Leave it to me," said Bob Eyre, "if it's a bit of a gamble, and it sounds like it, I'll be glad to find out on my own account."

Presently he accosted Colonel M'Clure with a diplomatic question or two, and found him most genial and freely communicative. His ruddy face and white hair and whiskers gave the old Colonel a benevolent, Father Christmassy appearance. But his was not the goody-goody order of benevolence, for

he could drink his glass and tell a story with the best, and his jolly laugh was a pick-me-up to a man in low spirits.

"The run of the ship!" he cried in reply to Bob Eyre's frank question. "My dear boy"—he was of the kind that call all young men dear boys—"don't tell me you have never heard of the lottery on the run of the ship."

"Won't you let me tell the truth, Colonel, once in a while? Remember, I've had only one voyage before, and that was steerage."

"Well, you've come to the right shop for information. I've been auctioneer and general boss of the lottery a score of times. Couldn't live through the voyage without it. The trip takes considerably less than no time when you have the lottery going, you bet your bottom dollar on that. I tell you what, sir—"

"Easy there!" Bob Eyre broke in upon the enthusiast before he got into his stride. "First tell me, if you please, what the thing is, anyway."

The Colonel passed from enthusiasm to explanation.

"You know the little map hanging in the broad passage between the library and the smoking-room on the upper deck?"

Eyre nodded.

"Then you have seen the day's run of the vessel is drawn each day on that map in a red line across the blue sea, with the length marked in plain figures?"

"With the last voyage marked in full," added Eyre.

"Exactly, my boy. I see you have your eyes

skinned. Perhaps you have noticed that the length of the day's run ranges from about four eighty-five to five-twenty. The variation is twenty or thirty miles, and the average run about five hundred. Now, here is the way the lottery is worked. A score of us—more or less—have a pound each in the pool. We put numbers up to a certain limit in a hat —say from 490 to 510—and draw. Whichever number hits the ship's run for that day scoops the pool. See? "

" But I don't see—"

" Easy on, my boy. I know what you were going to say. Maybe none of the numbers would hit the ship's run. To meet that chance there is the 'high field'—all numbers over the highest number in that hat—and the 'low field'—all under the lowest.

" But that's not the whole game either. The best is to follow. The numbers, after they are drawn, are put up to general auction. A man may bid for his own number. If he buys it in he has only to pay half the price into the general pool. If an outsider buys, the owner gets half the price bid, and the pool takes the other half. The 'high field' and the 'low field' are not drawn for at all, but auctioned right away. The auction is the real fun—eh, what? "

" A bully game! " cried Bob Eyre with enthusiasm. " Is there room for one more inside? "

" We'll try to squeeze you in, my boy. The draw will be in half-an-hour's time. There are seventeen in already; you'll make eighteen."

Later on, when Bob, as in duty bound, tried to

explain the mystery to Miss Phœbe, she cut him short midway without mercy. "It sounds like a conundrum, and I hate conundrums," she said.

But Bob found her father, Judge Everly, there when he came to draw his number that evening. Mr Rhondel was also beguiled into taking a hand in the game. The bidding in the smoking-room ran its lively course amid a storm of good-humoured chaff to which Colonel M'Clure was the main contributor.

Bob Eyre persisted that it was a bully game, in which view he was confirmed when two days later he scooped the pool of £134 with the figure 505 which he had bought at the auction for £11, having sold his own figure 504 for £10.

He was intoxicated with his success, stood drinks all round, and strutted about next day, with his tail up, to where his wife sat on the deck chair reading placidly.

"I told you so, Kitty," he crowed. "I knew I could meet and beat the knowing ones at their own game. Just a little bit of head work, that's all. I took a note of the wind and the weather, and picked the right number out on my own judgment first try. It's a little bit of all right, my dear, and here's your share of the winnings." He poured a clinking stream of gold coins into her lap.

"I wish you would leave it at that, Bob; I'm afraid."

"Fear killed a cat, or was it care? it does not matter which; don't let either kill my mouse. Keep your eye on your hubby, he'll see you through. I only wish I could get these johnnies to pile it

on a bit. I don't care for this game of chuck farthing."

That evening, when they were only one day out from Queenstown, Bob Eyre had his wish. The boat had been making great time of late, averaging 515 miles a day, and there was general surprise when Colonel M'Clure, to whom the arrangement of the figure was intrusted for the most part, fixed the range of the lottery from 485 to 510.

"It's a dead cert. for the 'high field,'" objected one of the coterie.

"Don't you believe it," retorted the Colonel. "Fine weather cannot last for ever. I have crossed more times than you, my boy; there is generally a bit of a blow as we come close to the poor distressful country. I don't mind having a try at the 'low field' myself, I can tell you."

The majority were, however, of the other way of thinking. The sky was without a cloud, the wind behind them, the glass going up. "Shouldn't mind betting an even pony," said one languid youth in grey flannels, "that we do our 520 this run."

"Done," cried the Colonel so sharply that the languid youth's jaw fell, and he abandoned the opposition.

Then Colonel M'Clure developed an unexpected vein of obstinacy. He seemed hurt that his judgment was questioned, and the talk began to grow hot when Judge Everly, in the interests of peace, came round to the side of the Colonel.

"Easy with the pepper castor, gentlemen," he said, "let the Colonel have his way. It's as good for

the goose as the gander. We can each back our own fancy in the lottery, and the laugh will be on him when the 'high field' romps in an easy winner."

Bob Eyre joined in on the same side, and the Colonel carried the day.

"I know the Colonel was all wrong, of course," Bob confided to Kitty, "but it was not my cue to tell him so. So I kept my eye on the 'high field' as a dead cert."

That night there was wild excitement in the smoking-room when the numbers were put up to auction. Colonel M'Clure, wielding a huge pipe-case for an auctioneer's hammer, was better fun than ever. His good-humoured jests were like oil on the troubled waters of the gamblers' feverish excitement. For the bidding ran high. By a chance, lucky or unlucky, the Rev. Abel Lankin, whose protesting presence was always a check upon any kind of gambling, did not put in an appearance.

The high spirits of the company, excited at the thought of approaching their journey's end, found a vent in high betting. Number after number was bid close up to three figures. The bigger the number the bigger the bidding, but when the Colonel reached the "high field," which looked so like a certainty, the company threw their self-control completely away, and the bidding was fast and furious. All joined in at first, and three hundred was bid before the pack began to thin off.

When five hundred was reached three men had the bidding between them—Judge Everly, thin-lipped and determined; Colonel M'Clure, full of jovial

good-humour; and Bob Eyre, more reckless than ever from a slight overdose of champagne. These three kept capping each other's bids with monotonous regularity, while the rest of the company sat silent with the secondary excitement which high gambling always begets amongst the onlookers. The bidding mounted up and up, five pounds at each jump, until it seemed it would never stop. At three thousand pounds Colonel M'Clure suddenly gave way.

" I'm out of it," he said, pausing to mop his red face with a big silk handkerchief, and sucking hard at a huge cherry cobbler crowned with small icebergs that stood beside him, " this is too hot for me! Any bidding after three thousand? "

" Three thousand and five," said the Judge, in a dogged voice.

" Guineas," shouted Bob Eyre, defiantly.

That settled it. There was a long, breathless silence. The Judge seemed to hesitate for a moment. A bid hung poised on the tip of his tongue; then with an angry movement he abruptly turned his back on the auctioneer.

" Three thousand one hundred and fifty bid," Colonel M'Clure went on imperturbably. " Any bid after that? Now's your time, gentlemen, to make your fortune; going for a trifle, the chance of a lifetime. You will be cursing to-morrow when our young friend here rakes in the pool. Going! going! gone! The ' high field ' to Robert Eyre, Esq., for three thousand one hundred and fifty to be paid into the pool."

It was thought that the auction of the " low field "

would be a very tame business after this. The "low field" seemed so plainly out of the running that it looked as if the Colonel could buy it for a song; but a surprise awaited the company.

Mr Rhondel, who had been drinking silently and steadily while the auction was in progress, apparently impervious to the excitement around him, now suddenly took a hand in the game.

To all present it seemed a case of a born gambler suddenly breaking loose from the curb of self-restraint and letting himself go. He bid with mad recklessness. Bob Eyre had been cool and prudent by comparison.

The company looked on in amazement. It was a duel to the death between two men—Mr Rhondel and the auctioneer. At first Colonel M'Clure was inclined to jest at his opponent while the bidding mounted rapidly.

"All the better for the pool, boys," he said with a side wink to Bob Eyre, who sat at his right exulting in his own "dead cert."

But when Mr Rhondel took to piling it on fifty at a time the jovial Colonel's manner changed. His face hardened; he threw away his cigar, put aside his cherry cobbler, called for a brandy-and-soda, and went to work doggedly.

There was not a second's interval between the bids, and the total mounted with bewildering rapidity. It was a fierce contest, but a short one—the pace was too hot to last.

At four thousand and fifty Mr Rhondel suddenly collapsed, and, after a long delay and many urgent appeals to the company to come in and make their

fortunes—"It was just picking up money"—the jovial Colonel, his good-humour now completely restored, knocked the "low field" down to himself.

Then there was the reaction after the excitement. The high figures had sobered the company. Through the dead silence the clear, incisive voice of Judge Everly was heard:

"This is a big gamble, gentlemen," he said, "and a ready-money business, I take it. There should be about seven thousand three hundred all told in the pool. I vote that we settle up and appoint a stakeholder before we part."

There was a murmur of approval. "I'm agreeable," said Bob Eyre, "I will pay in at once spot cash. I beg to nominate Mr Rhondel as stakeholder, as he is out of the gamble."

"I will be glad to have Mr Rhondel if he has no objection," said Colonel M'Clure, cordially, "though he did push me to the pin of my collar that time. Another fiver and I would have knocked under. But I love a stout fighter."

Thereupon Mr Rhondel, whose excitement seemed to have completely fallen away when he was knocked out of the bidding, declared his readiness to act.

Several of the men retired to their cabins for cheque-books or money. Eventually the entire amount to the last penny was paid over to Mr Rhondel.

There were several cheques, but Bob Eyre, Colonel M'Clure and Judge Everly, who between them contributed more than nine-tenths of the pool, plumped down spot cash.

Mr Rhondel gave a receipt for the money and left the saloon, one pocket bulging with a huge roll of

notes and cheques to the tune of seven thousand three hundred pounds, and the other with a heavy revolver of the latest pattern.

He had a few minutes' talk with Mrs Eyre, who was seated in the starlight waiting for the news of the final gamble, and to whom he gave a brief and graphic description of the exciting scene in the smoking-room.

"Three thousand guineas!" said the little woman, dolefully. "How many dollars in that, I wonder?"

"Fifteen thousand seven fifty," replied Mr Rhondel, promptly.

"That makes it sound a deal worse. Fifteen thousand seven fifty dollars gone in a snap of the fingers to the bottom of the sea!"

"Don't say that, young woman. See, I've got it here in this pocket-book, with a lot more of other people's money."

"I've a great mind to rob you."

"Better not." He showed the butt of a big revolver protruding from his pocket.

"Sit further away," she cried in affected fear, "the brute might go off; besides, I'm ashamed of your getting mixed up in things of this kind, and encouraging Bob to scatter his dollars. At your age, too!"

"What would you say if I handed the pocket-book and all its contents over to you to-morrow?"

"You don't mean it, of course, but I could almost kiss you if you did."

"I hate that word 'almost.'"

"And I hate that word 'if.'"

"If I drop out 'if,' will you drop out 'almost'?"

"Sure."

"Good-night, then, and mind I'll keep you to your word. I've an early start to-morrow morning. The parson chap has arranged with Anderson, the chief engineer, to show him over the engines and machinery at eight o'clock, and I'm going too. Halloa, Mr Anderson!"

A stout, dark-bearded man with a clever, resolute face, passed them, peering into the semi-darkness as if in search of somebody.

"Yes, I'm here and want a word with you," said Mr Rhondel. "Good-night again, Mrs Eyre, and don't forget your promise."

The two men walked up and down the full length of the deck half a dozen times at least, talking earnestly.

"It's the only way," Mr Rhondel said at last.

"And a dang good way too," retorted Sandy Anderson, "if you're right in the rest. I'm your man to the finish. You do your part, I'll do mine. See you to-morrow morning at eight; meanwhile take care of yourself."

An early party of five curious sightseers, including Mr Rhondel and the parson, passed through a long passage to the steerage decks, where already a number of the early-rising Irish "boys" and "colleens" were strolling affectionately in couples, and talking, doubtless, of the old land.

"This way, gentlemen," said Mr Anderson, and opened a door that led to a long iron staircase running down to the hollow womb of the big boat.

The chief engineer welcomed them heartily to his kingdom of steel and steam. Looking down

through the open ironwork of the hard-working giants in the yawning cavern, they had only a vague, confused vision of rushing pistons and revolving cranks. But Mr Anderson led them down the interminable iron steps to the very den of the monsters.

He answered all questions with the pride and delight of a fond father when his clever children show off before strangers. Because his admiration of those wonders was the most demonstrative of all, the Rev. Abel Lankin came in for most attention. The curate was like a child in his frank surprise and delight at the steel miracles around him.

He pointed to one of two huge columns of polished metal a hundred yards long that ran from the engine-room right through the stern of the steamer.

"That's the rod of the screw," said Mr Anderson.

"Rod!" cried the Rev. Mr Lankin, in amazement, "it's more like a church pillar. What does it do?"

"It pushes this big ship, twenty-three thousand tons of steel without the extras, through the sea, rough or smooth, it doesn't matter which, at the rate of twenty miles an hour. Takes it easy, doesn't it? Put your hand there."

Mr Lankin touched the shiny steel with timid fingers.

"It doesn't seem to move at all," he said.

"Oh, it moves right enough, or this ship wouldn't move. The surface is so smooth you don't feel it. Easy on," he added laughingly, as Mr Lankin stepped from the gangway down beside the revolving column, "easy there, or you will burst your way

through. There's no more than three-quarters of an inch of steel between your foot and the ocean."

"Am I so near the surface?"

"You are twenty feet under the surface, sir, and that's as near as you want to go to land in that direction I'm thinking. Come along, there are other things worth seeing."

But Mr Lankin wouldn't budge an inch.

"What are those little holes for?" he said.

"For oil," Mr Anderson answered good-naturedly, as humouring a child.

"And if you don't put oil in?"

"The metal would get red-hot, maybe melt, and someone would have a wigging, you bet."

At last Mr Lankin tore himself away, and followed with the exploring party through the great cavern lit with electric light, and fresh and cool with clean ocean air sent down through the ventilating shaft that captured the Atlantic breezes a hundred feet overhead. The fascination of the great propeller shaft, however, still held the curate's imagination amid all the mechanical marvels of this cave of mystery. The white-hot furnaces, the swinging cranks, the purring dynamos, could not capture his attention.

He crept quietly back for a last look before he returned with his party to the upper air. Mr Anderson was plainly impatient at the delay.

"You should keep with the party, sir," he said sharply, when the meek little curate showed himself at last, "you might easily get hurt by the machinery."

Undeterred by this sharp rebuke, and with a

muttered apology that he had forgotten his cigar-case, Mr Rhondel bolted back into the hold.

The genial Mr Anderson tugged at his short beard irritably, but he said no word. Mr Rhondel was back again in a moment, his cigar-case ostentatiously in his hand. He muttered a few words of apparent apology to Mr Anderson that were inaudible to the rest of the company.

But whatever he said failed to bring Mr Anderson back to good-humour. The genial guide was suddenly transformed into the curt official.

"Kindly show these gentlemen their way back," he said sharply to one of his subordinates. "I've got my work to attend to."

Without a word more he turned his back on the party and again went swiftly down the long ladder to his own restless dominions.

The party had scarcely got safely up to the deck when a strange thing happened. The throbbing and heaving of the giants in the hold, which day and night sent an incessant tremor through the huge bulk of the vessel, suddenly ceased. Swiftly and smoothly at first, and then slowly and more slowly, the great ship slid forward over the smooth sea till at last she lay quite still:

"As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean."

Then a wild hubbub arose amongst the passengers.

In less than a moment the captain was down amongst them, cheerily assuring them that there was not the slightest danger. There had been some slight trouble with the machinery, which would be put right in less than no time.

Still the ship lay motionless for a long hour, and the excitement amongst the gamblers was every moment more intense. Colonel M'Clure puffed himself out triumphantly, taking all the credit of the hindering accident to his own sagacity.

"I knew the 'low field' could not lose," he said. "What have you chaps to say for yourselves now?"

"Luck, pure luck," grumbled Bob Eyre, who every moment saw his chance slipping away from him. "Bar accident the 'high field' was a sure thing; but there's no fighting against luck."

"Accidents will occur in the best-regulated ships," chuckled the Colonel.

He seemed a bit disappointed when, after about an hour, the big ship began again to slip through the waters, slowly at first, but with momentarily increasing speed. He took out his gold repeater.

"I reckon," he said, "she has lost a good twenty miles by her trouble, whatever it was. The pool is as good as mine."

At about half-past eleven Mr Rhondel appeared on deck hastily, and gathered the Judge and the Colonel and the rest interested in the pool into the smoking-room. He seemed nervous and excited.

"I have found something out," he said, "from Anderson, which I want you all to hear—especially you, Judge; and you, Colonel, as you are the most interested. I want your advice."

"Get up on the table," cried the Colonel, good-humouredly. "Some of you chaps shut the door, and don't let anyone else in. We don't mind the ladies, bless 'em, but we don't want eavesdroppers. Now, my boy, fire away!"

Mrs Kitty Eyre had come into the room with Miss Phœbe Everly and two or three other ladies. But there was no sign of the Rev. Mr Lankin, and all knew whom the Colonel wished to keep out.

Mr Rhondel, mounted on a table, looked round at the eager circle of listeners till his eyes rested on Colonel M'Clure and Judge Everly, who stood close to the table together. He startled them by his first words.

"There has been foul play," he said—"the machinery in the ship's hold has been tampered with. That's how the vessel was stopped."

The smile died out of the Colonel's frank blue eyes—the genial face set hard. As if by instinct his right hand went down to a hip pocket that held his weapon.

"Have a care, sir," he snapped out—"have a care. Do you accuse any gentleman here of foul play?"

But Mr Rhondel went on, bland, conciliatory, unabashed.

"Certainly not, Colonel—most certainly not, Judge. I accuse no one, I only state the facts. After the chief engineer had shown a party of us over the hold this morning, this was found sticking in one of the holes for oiling the screw rod." He held up for all to see the half of an hour-glass, full of sand.

"How do you know it was found?" queried the Judge.

"Well, I, myself, found it. I went back for my cigar-case and found it. Only just in time—a minute more and the machinery would have been

white-hot, and would have melted with the tremendous friction, and the vessel stopped for the day. As it was, there was an hour's delay to clean and oil."

"Well," said the Colonel, briskly, "assuming all this rigmarole is true—what have we got to say to it?"

"What about the stakes I hold?" queried Mr Rhondel, "are the bets off? I wanted to make sure before the day's run is announced."

"Not likely," roared the Colonel. "I'm too old a campaigner to be diddled in that style. If 'low field' wins, I take the pool."

"Hear, hear!" cried two or three of the men who had got low figures and fancied their own chance. Then Judge Everly spoke out sharply.

"The gamble was unconditional," he said, "every man is entitled to his chance. I have no interest in the thing one way or the other."

"I say so too," chimed in Bob Eyre, "a bet is a bet, and I'm not the one to squeal if the luck goes against me."

That settled it. There was a general murmur of assent.

"Then the figure of the day's run takes the pool," said Mr Rhondel. "I've no objection to that; I only want to know are you all agreed?"

"All!" they cried with one voice.

He looked at his watch, still standing on the table.

"In five minutes the captain will be here to tell us the day's run."

The five minutes seemed five hours, so intense was

'The smile died out of the Colonel's frank blue eyes. As if by instinct his right hand went down to a hip pocket that held his weapon

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the excitement. A low buzz of talk was in the air, like the eager whispering of a swarm of bees. It ceased in dead silence when the captain's handsome face showed at the door.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried in a pleasant voice that filled the silent room, "I've good news for you. In spite of the little trouble this morning we've made the record of the voyage. The run is 521 miles. I will have the figure marked on the chart."

The door had closed on him before the amazement in the room had found its voice. The impossible had happened—the "high field" had won!

"Three cheers for Bob Eyre," someone cried suddenly, and the cheers were given with a will that showed how popular was the winner.

"Ladies and gentlemen," cried Mr Rhondel again, and there was a new and dominant note in his voice that instantly captured attention. "You would like to know the answer to this riddle—perhaps I can help you to guess it. Don't go, Colonel, don't go, Judge, my remarks are particularly intended for you. Have you ever heard of a Mr Beck?—Paul Beck at your service." He plucked off his brown beard as he spoke and whisked away a pair of bushy eyebrows, and his face seemed to change its expression, almost its features. Mr Rhondel disappeared—Mr Beck arrived.

"Ha! I thought so," he exclaimed—for the two men stared at him open-mouthed. "I have met the Judge and the Colonel before, and it's pleasant to be remembered by old friends. Well, the Blue Star Company were kind enough to think I would be

useful on board. There had been too much professional gambling on their ships of late.

"Somehow, when I saw you so keen on the 'low field,' I thought it possible that something might happen to the machinery this morning—coincidences are always occurring. That's why I made you pay for your fancy. My good friend Anderson ran the ship at extra speed all night, in case by any chance there might be an accident in the morning. It was Mr Lankin who left this pretty little toy behind him by accident in the engine-room. Lucky, wasn't it, that I found it before it had done much harm. You don't know Mr Lankin, of course, Colonel; nor you, Judge? He just played this monkey trick off his own bat for the fun of the thing. Never had a thought about the 'low field' when he did it. No one would suggest such a thing as collusion. But we needn't go into that, need we? As Judge Everly said just now, it was an unconditional gamble. The stakes go by the figure, and the 'high field' scoops the pool."

There followed a shout of applause and laughter, for Mr Beck's exposure was complete. The Colonel and the Judge cut very sorry figures, as, self-confessed swindlers, they sneaked out of the room. All were delighted at the neat way in which the tricksters had been caught in their own trap.

"There only remains," went on Mr Beck, suavely, "to pay over the cash to Mr Eyre—or rather, if he will allow me, to his wife, who has kindly promised me a receipt in full."

Kitty, who had listened delightedly to the rogues' discomfiture, started at the sound of her own name,

looked up and met the challenge in his eyes, and remembered her promise of the night before.

Blushing and smiling, she flashed back her answer to the challenge, and said saucily, in her dainty drawl:

"Sure."

VIII

DRIVEN HOME

"It was his luck," so Mr Beck always said. "The whole thing might have happened to any man." But no person who had heard the story quite agreed with him.

It was luck, of course, that he found the silver spoon in the hansom cab. Prying about keenly, as was his wont, he saw the thin white edge shining behind one of the cushions and fished out a curious-looking teaspoon and put it in his pocket.

He had a good look at the number of the hansom and the driver when he got out. The hansom was one of the neatest in London, with a sweet little twelve-mile-an-hour mare between the shafts. The driver was a stoutly-built, jaunty fellow, with mottled face and big red nose. He was smartly dressed, with a nosegay in his button-hole and cigar between his teeth.

Mr Beck dismissed his cab and walked to Mr Ophir, the famous jeweller and silversmith, whose name was on the spoon.

He was received by Mr Ophir himself—a mark of special distinction—in the little glass pavilion in the centre of the glittering warehouse.

Yes, Mr Ophir knew the spoon very well. It was

one of a set made by his house in imitation of the old apostle pattern. Very creditable imitation; he should say it would need a skilled eye to tell the difference.

"Who got them?" asked Mr Beck, going straight to the point.

"Who got them! Let me see; just one moment. It is in the books, of course, but I ought to be able—" He tapped his forehead, that was smooth and round and polished as an ostrich egg. "Oh, yes, of course, they were part of a tea-set made as a wedding present for the Merediths. Now I remember, they were stolen about a month ago."

"The suburban burglaries," interrupted Mr Beck, and he slapped his big thigh excitedly with his broad palm—an unusual lapse on the part of the most stolid of men.

But his excitement was surely pardonable.

The London police had for the last few months been startled, amazed, bewildered by a rapid series of brilliant burglaries, all within a fifteen to twenty-mile radius of London.

"The cribs had been cracked" in the highest style of art, and the artists with their rich booty had vanished into space, leaving as little trail as a fish through the water. They were gentlemen who did not stick at trifles. Three times, it would appear, they had been interrupted at their work, and three people had been left for dead behind them, and one—a woman—had died.

No wonder then that Mr Beck was excited for a moment at the hope that his "luck" had put him on the track of the suburban burglaries at last. But

his excitement was quenched instantly like a spark fallen in water. It was the good-humoured, easy-going, imperturbable Mr Beck who walked home to his cosy lodgings to puzzle his plan out.

He plunged into a great easy-chair, with a pipe stem between his teeth and the spoon before him on the table, as a saint sets a skull to concentrate his meditations. It would be worse than useless, he determined, to arrest or even question the driver. If he knew anything he wouldn't tell it, and plainly he could not be responsible for a silver spoon dropped behind the cushion of his hansom.

If the man were guilty—and Mr Beck fondly hoped he was guilty—a hint of suspicion would ruin all. So Mr Beck sat and smoked and thought, and as the smoke grew denser his thoughts cleared.

"If I could only get quietly inside that fellow's skin," he thought, and with the thought came his plan of campaign. Then he put by the little silver spoon and smoked his pipe out in vacuous enjoyment.

The result of his meditations was that Mr Beck—this time a simple-looking farmer up for the cattle show—had a drive in the same hansom next day and found the cab neater and the mare faster than he imagined.

He got in talk with the driver, whose name he discovered was Jim Blunt. The Cockney cabby made game of the simple-minded yokel. They had several drinks together, and Mr Beck noted that the spirited little mare was trained to stand quietly as a lamb when the driver was away.

Next day Mr Beck was a portly clergyman on a

shopping expedition. He took Mr Blunt's hansom here, there and everywhere, and acquired a multitude of parcels. A most genial and cheerful clergyman was Mr Beck and most affable with his driver, with whom he talked a good deal and whom he talked into the best of good humour. That was at first.

Towards evening the zealous clergyman broached the Temperance question with a distinct personal application, and Mr Blunt got sullen. In parting, the Rev. Mr Beck presented his driver with his exact legal fare, and Mr Blunt was furious. He spoke his views fully and freely, and the other looked and listened, sorting up every trick of face and voice in his retentive memory. Then when a policeman loomed in sight at last the meek Mr Beck turned away with a Christian benediction and meditatively mounted the steps of his lodgings. He had seen and heard enough of his model.

For two days after this Mr Beck was a shop messenger in uniform, with a light tricycle parcel cart, quite empty; and wherever Mr Blunt drove his hansom the tricycle cart unobtrusively followed, faithful as the little lamb to Mary in the nursery rhyme.

In this way the patient Mr Beck found out many things. He found that Mr Blunt was not keen on fares and was keen on sport and drink. He spent his leisure moments—often all day—in the sanctum of a certain sporting public-house in the East End called the "Ram's Horn." There he met a convivial commercial traveller named Fulham and a bookmaker named Grimes, and the three drank and played cards,

while a tricycle cart with a heavy, stupid-looking rider went past the door occasionally.

There was another change; a startling one this time.

Mr Paul Beck became Mr James Blunt. In clothes and figure and face and voice, in all his tricks and ways, the counterfeit was perfect. Mr Blunt's wife or mother could not have found a difference.

The translated Mr Beck took to dropping into the "Ram's Horn" on his own account at odd times when he had reason to believe Mr Blunt was elsewhere with a fare. He was made free of the sanctum, and the unsophisticated commercial traveller Fulham and the genial bookmaker Grimes received him as "Jim" with rough but unsuspecting cordiality.

They were both big, strong men, active and sleek, who spent money freely. They were full of sly, chuckling jokes about "business" when the three were drinking together. A very little time was needed to convince Mr Beck by a hundred trivial hints that he was on the straight track of the suburban burglars. A dozen times in an hour he seemed on the point of surprising some definite proof. But lead the talk as cunningly as he might he could get no further. For the others assumed he knew as much as themselves, and he dared not appear too curious.

It was a dangerous game. An indiscreet question might arouse suspicion, and suspicion meant death. Besides, it was a ticklish thing playing Box and Cox with the real Mr Blunt, who had a knack of throwing up his engagements and turning up at unexpected

times. Twice Mr Beck had barely time to slip away quietly before his double appeared.

It was in truth a difficult and dangerous game, but he played it out coolly and warily to the close.

Instinctively he felt that things were growing rapidly to a climax. A new burglary was on foot; so much he could gather from stray hints. Unfortunately the *coup* had been planned with the real Jim Blunt, and so the knowledge of the false Jim Blunt was taken for granted. He only learnt that a crib was to be cracked some distance outside London, and that the three were to take part in the cracking. Even the night he could not make quite sure of.

He determined on a final effort at any cost to get hold of the secret.

An appointment was made with the real Mr Blunt to call for an old lady at the theatre. At eleven precisely the mock Mr Blunt strolled into the inner parlour of the " Ram's Horn " with his driving whip under his arm, as though he had just stepped down from the driver's seat of his hansom. He had a ball of whipcord in his hand and was platting a new cracker for his whip thong, as was the habit of the real Mr Blunt.

Both his friends were there smoking cigars and drinking champagne out of pewter.

" Hello! Jim," cried Fulham, " up to time and before it. Want that for to-night? "—pointing to the whipcord. " Susie must put her best leg foremost." " Susie " was the sweet little mare.

" Have a touch of the whipcord yourself," he added, pushing towards him a bright tankard crowned with foam, " that will put spunk in you."

Mr Beck blew off the foam and had a deep pull of the liquor that shone golden in the glass-bottomed tankard.

"Luck!" he said, as he put the vessel down half empty. Mr Blunt was inclined to be laconic, not to say sullen, in his cups.

"Got the tools all right?" he added, pointing to the pocket of Mr Grimes, which bulged and dragged a little as with a hidden weight.

"You bet," said Mr Grimes, and he exhibited with pardonable professional pride a jemmy, a revolver, and an electric dark lantern, all of the latest and neatest pattern.

"Nasty job and nasty night," Mr Blunt's understudy grumbled hoarsely in the recesses of his pewter.

"You be d——d, Jim," retorted Mr Fulham, cheerily; "are you afraid the draught will give you a cold in your blooming nut, my rosebud? Want a big, yellow moon and a nightingale, you do. It's a picked night for our little picnic. Hark to the wind screaming like a drunken fishwife.'

"It was the job itself I was thinking of worse nor the weather," he grumbled, still sulky.

"The job!" cried Mr Fulham, indignantly, "why there never was a neater thing put up since we went into business. It is as easy as kiss hands. Hubby is away for a week's shooting; missis is young and timid. The butler—the only man in the house—is a heavy sleeper, told Grimes so himself, and he ought to know. He has got twenty quid down as a sleeping draught, and he is to get twenty more when the job is through. He's that forgetful I

shouldn't be surprised if he were to leave the kitchen window open and the key in the plate closet before he went to bed. Eh! Grimes? " and the wink he gave was full of expression. " The place is chock-full of silver; a regular Peruvian mine. The wedding presents alone made a column in the *Times*, all waiting peacefully to be carried away. If that's a nasty job I'd feel obliged "—with elaborate politeness—" for your notion of a nice one? "

" It's a long way to get to," objected the grumbler, half apologetically.

" A long way! I don't know what's come to you to-night, Jim; a long way! it's fifteen mile, not an inch more."

" I make it better nor twenty."

" Do you think it's an old-lady fare you're jawing, Jim? It's under fifteen, if anything. You goes out by Kensington, you see, and then you turns round to the—"

Mr Beck was listening with both his ears, but at this moment the shock head of the potboy was thrust in at the door.

" Hansom's waiting, gents, and—"

Then he caught sight of the mock Mr Blunt, and stood with eyes and mouth extended to the uttermost —a grotesque statue of amazement. He had been honoured with a kick and a curse by the real Mr Blunt a moment before.

But Mr Beck gave him no time for thought or speech.

" Come along! " he shouted to the others, " time's up! "

He bundled the bewildered boy out before him into the street and discreetly disappeared in the black shadow beside the door.

The others only waited to polish off their pewter pints of champagne and came grumbling out after him, and climbed into their places in the hansom. Mr Blunt was in the driver's seat, with a huge portmanteau in front of him on the roof.

" Know the way now, Jim? " Mr Beck heard Mr Fulham say to the driver.

" Do you take me for a darn fool? " was the gruff response. The trap-door on the roof was slapped down hard, the driver's whip cracked, and the hansom sped away swiftly.

For a short second Mr Beck stood helpless.

But he had hardly time to say " d——n " once when his eye lit upon a bicycle that leant against the wall while the owner had gone into the " Ram's Horn " for a drink.

" ' Set a thief to catch a thief,' " he muttered between his teeth. " I'll qualify."

The next second he was astride the machine, scorching down the street in swift pursuit of the vanishing hansom.

For a while he kept pace with it easily enough, slipping in and out through the traffic like an eel. But gradually they drew clear of the town, the long road stretched open before them, and the mare flew.

Mr Beck settled himself on his hard saddle. The bicycle did not suit him. It was heavy and the stretch was too short, and the pedals brought his knees within an inch of the handle-bars as they rose.

But he struggled on bravely, keeping the shadowy outline of the hansom well in view.

The road turned sharply, and the rush of the strong wind came straight against him like a broad hand on his chest holding him back. But he was a powerful rider, and he put his weight and strength into each drive of the pedal, shoving his way through the wind like a steamer through a current.

It was cruel work. The wind whistled and tore past him; his muscles ached, and the sweat fell from his bent face in big drops on the road, but he still kept the flying shadow of the hansom in view. The strain grew tenser still. He felt the pedals push back against his feet as he drove them down. The road sloped abruptly, and the vague outline of the hansom gradually merged in the darkness.

"The game is up," Mr Beck muttered through his clenched teeth, but at the same moment came the remembrance of that ball of whipcord in his pocket and a use for it.

Slacking speed for an instant, with hand and teeth he made a running noose at one end of the cord and tied the other to the handle bar. Then he grasped the handle bar tight in the middle, bent head and shoulders over it, and put all the strength of his body into one mad spurt up the hill. It was agony while it lasted. He felt the veins in his forehead swell, his heart thumped fiercely against his ribs and his breath came in labouring sobs, but still the bicycle leapt on through the wind.

Slowly the hansom came back to him. The outline grew clearer and darker. Nearer and nearer he crept, and at last his stretched fingers slipped the

noose over the curl of the back rail. He had shot his bolt; he could not have kept up the terrible strain for ten yards more. He let the cord slip till it came tight with a jerk that almost whipped the bicycle from under him. But he steadied himself in a moment, and then, with a fresh wind blowing cool against his burning face, he felt his bicycle glide smoothly and swiftly uphill of its own accord in the wake of the flying hansom.

He straightened his chest and drew deep breaths of the cool air into his labouring lungs, and still the bicycle flew smoothly, easily, and almost as swiftly as a bird.

So they sped on, mile after mile, uphill for the most part, with now and again a sudden dip in the road that slackened the tense cord and brought Mr Beck's hands to the brakes for a time.

An hour and a quarter had passed—Mr Beck could guess the time better than most modern watches—when the hansom drew up suddenly on the crest of a long hill, and the fast-following bicycle almost ran into it.

Mr Beck, who had been expecting a halt, saved and steadied himself with a firm grip on the back rail of the hansom, and waited and listened.

He heard the trap-door open and Fulham's voice say: "Take it easy now, Jim; the house is on the slope of the hill not a quarter of a mile off. We must get round by the back way, and leave the horse and trap in the lane. The middle window at the back is open ready for us."

Mr Beck waited to hear no more. He undid the cord from the rail, gathered it up in a loose fistful and

then, where the shadow was blackest, slid silently past the hansom down the incline.

In a moment the hansom began to move again slowly and cautiously. It would almost seem as if the well-trained little mare knew silence was needed, so lightly she stepped.

All things went well with the three brave burglars. At the bottom of the lane a convenient stand was found for the docile mare, and she was left with her nose buried in a feed of old oats. The window opened at a touch, and one after another the three dark forms crept stealthily through, the last pushing the big portmanteau in to the others.

"I have the glim," Grimes whispered, and the gleam of the electric lantern lay along the black passage.

They crept past the kitchen and wine cellars to a strong oak door with the key stuck in the lock. It opened on oiled hinges, and the light glittered on piles of silver.

"Cricky!" was Fulham's expressive comment as he and Grimes passed through with lantern and portmanteau, while Blunt waited in the passage with revolver ready.

The gaping mouth of the portmanteau seemed to open of its own accord to engulf the glittering treasure. It was wonderful how quickly and how noiselessly salvers and cups and bowls and jugs, with double fistfuls of silver spoons for packing, were crammed into its capacious stomach. In ten minutes it lay on the floor locked and strapped and gorged with heavy metal.

"I could do with a drink," said Fulham, straightening his back and wiping his hot face.

"I'll get one," said Grimes. "I know the way of the place." He came back with a bottle of champagne in each hand and one under his arm. "Friend in court," he exclaimed. They got the corks out in a trice and drank the foaming liquor from silver.

"Nasty job this," said Fulham, with a wink at Grimes, "eh! Jim?"

"Awful night," replied Grimes, with responsive wink, "sorry you came, Jim?"

"Who are you coming at?" growled Blunt. "I see nothing wrong with the night, or the job, or the drink either, for the matter of that."

"Who are we coming at? We are coming at you. You don't like this and you don't like that. Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Miss Molly?"

"For two straws I'd give you a wipe across your blooming mug. I was readier for the game than you were."

"Just listen to him, Fulham, will you?" cried the justly indignant Grimes. "You was as ready as I was!"

"Ay, and readier!"

"Then why did you come whining about it?"

Blunt's big fist was clenched, and the prudent Fulham thought it time to intervene in the interest of peace.

"You're a brace of bally idiots," said the peacemaker. "Business first and pleasure afterwards. You may bash each other into small bits when we have got the swag safe. Here, lend a hand with the portmantle, Grimes; it's time to be rambling."

"What about upstairs?" said Blunt, returning to business, the more anxious to show his pluck and

gumption from Grimes' sneers. "There will be whips of jewels where there's so much plate."

"Have a try while Grimes and I bring this load out to the trap," said Fulham; "there's a second lantern."

"Heavy!" grunted Grimes, as they lugged the portmanteau along the passage.

"You'd like it light, would you?" chuckled Fulham.

Blunt crept cautiously up the broad staircase, his stockinged feet sinking noiselessly in the deep velvet pile of the carpet. He paused for a moment at the drawing-room door and let a beam of light from his lantern fall across the pitch darkness of the big room.

"Nick-nacks and pictures and crockery-ware," he muttered contemptuously; "I'm not taking any, thank ye."

Softly as a great cat the burly ruffian moved up to the next floor along the narrow lane of light the lantern made for him through the darkness. In the still silence he could hear the tick of the great clock in the hall like the beating of a hammer.

To his right and left were doors. He put his hand gently on the knob to the left and turned. The light of the lantern flashed back in his dazzled eyes from a great mirror that fronted him as he entered, and glittered among the jewels that lay scattered on the dressing-table.

His delight found vent in a whispered blasphemy. Setting his lantern on the dressing-table he began to cram the jewels greedily into his knotted handkerchief.

His elbow struck a porcelain ring stand and it went down with a clatter of metal and broken china on the carpet. The gems were scattered and rolled and lay twinkling like coloured fireflies in the lantern's rays. Blunt stooped to gather them in the half darkness. He was still on his knees when suddenly the whole room flashed out in the brilliant glow of a dozen electric lights.

Turning round sharply he saw a lady fronting him not five yards away.

She was graceful and beautiful as a statue in her long white night robe, fastened with a knot of blue ribbons at the throat. Her naked feet peeped from under the lace trimming pure white on the rich carpet. Down to her waist her hair fell in a tangle of ripples and curls. Her face was white even to the lips, but her blue eyes shone big and bright, and she held in her right hand a revolver grasped tight by the barrel, the muzzle pointing at herself and the butt at the burglar.

Jim Blunt was not in the least affected by this vision of pale beauty. To him she was merely an unwelcome interruption of business.

"Drop it!" he growled, referring to the inverted revolver.

She dropped it obediently and it exploded as it fell and a shrill shriek followed the report. The room was full of the stinging smoke of gunpowder.

Jim Blunt cursed volubly.

"Shut your blooming mouth!" he cried; "quit squealing or I'll put a bullet in you!"

A second shrill shriek answered and the lady opened her lovely lips wide for a third.

Blunt whipped out his revolver and pointed it, right side forward, straight at her breast.

The scream was frozen on the lady's lips by sheer amazement, when straight behind the ruffian she saw his own counterfeit suddenly appear moving swiftly and silently as a shadow.

The revolver in Jim's hand went up with a sudden jerk, boring a round black hole in the white ceiling. A strong arm gripped his bull neck from behind and brought him choking and sprawling on his back on the carpet. The next moment he lay with handcuffs on his wrists and a gag between his teeth, prone and helpless.

Again the lady screamed shrilly.

"Not any more please, Mrs Meredith," said a familiar voice persuasively.

"Mr Beck!" she gasped out in utter amazement.

"Take it coolly, my dear lady, the surprise is nearly as great on my part, I assure you, at this pleasant meeting. I will explain everything later on. Just now I have a lot to do that won't wait. I am afraid I must leave this brute here with you. Don't look so frightened! he's quite harmless. I'll tie his feet and kick him into the bathroom."

He drew the serviceable ball of whipcord from his pocket and strained it tight, coil after coil, round Blunt's legs and arms till he lay parcelled up stiff and helpless as a log.

"You can make the maids roll him downstairs into the cellar if you like later on," said Mr Beck—"no! not the butler, I have taken the liberty of turning the key on the butler. You had best leave him where he is till I come back for him."

Hark! His keen ear caught the noise of the men below climbing back through the window. There was not an instant to spare. He pushed the prostrate and helpless Blunt with his foot across the carpet into the bathroom and turned the key in the door.

"Good-bye," he said, re-adjusting the false nose that had got slightly displaced during his exertions. "Our friends have heard the shots. I don't wish to give them the trouble of coming up. I'll meet them on the stairs."

He passed out quickly, closing the door after him. Not a moment too soon.

"That Jim?" said Fulham in a cautious whisper.

"Stow your noise!" Mr Beck growled in the identical voice that was at that moment corked up by the gag in the mouth of the recumbent Mr Blunt. "Stow your noise, it's all right, I'm coming."

He joined them on the landing opposite the drawing-room door.

"Why the blazes did you use the barkers?" growled Grimes.

"'Cause I had to; she was squealing like a mad steam-engine. I laid her out safe the second shot. She'll tell no tales; but it's about time to be off. I've got the swag safe enough," and he showed the heap of trinkets that poor Blunt had so industriously collected.

"Right you are," answered Fulham, "the luggage is up and the mare ready."

There was a pounding noise on the floor over their heads.

"Listen!" said Grimes, "there is someone kicking. You haven't made a clean job of it, Jim, she wants another dose of lead; I'll quiet her."

He turned to go up the stairs but Mr Beck's strong hand dragged him back. *He* knew whose hob-nailed boots were kicking the bathroom floor. "Let be, I tell you; it's her last kick; she's got a brace of bullets in her skull. I can do my work without your helping."

He pushed Grimes roughly down the stairs before him, Fulham following. So through the window they passed and down the lane-way where the hansom stood and the mare ready waiting with ears cocked.

Grimes and Fulham got to their places and Mr Beck climbed to the driver's seat with the big portmanteau tied in front of him.

He closed the wooden apron across their knees and let the plate-glass shutter down half way to meet it.

The gallant little mare started as fresh as ever and they bowled swiftly on noiseless, rubber-tyred wheels back to town.

Grimes and Fulham had carried a couple of bottles of champagne with them and the noise of the popping corks was heard presently in the interior of the hansom. After a brief interval a bottle's neck was protruded through the trap door at the top.

"I'm not taking any," said the driver, "I have the mare to look after—and you."

"Good old Jim!" said Grimes, effusively, elated at the prospect of more drink to share, "we can trust Jim to see us through. He knows where we

are bound for, better nor ourselves "—which was truer than the speaker thought.

The two bottles were duly emptied and the two inside passengers were pleasantly drowsy though not in the least drunk. They leant back at either side on the comfortable cushions while the hansom sped on its smooth, noiseless way to London.

Now they are sweeping through the silent town in the grey light of the early dawn. The streets seemed a little unfamiliar to their sleepy, half-opened eyes. But they had the most perfect confidence in Jim.

Their confidence was rudely shattered. The hansom took a sharp turn and drew up with a scramble at the entrance to Scotland Yard. The plate-glass shutter was let slip down on the wooden apron and Mr Beck leapt from his seat to the pavement.

"Hurry up! Hurry up!" he shouted, as four or five men came rushing out, while the two figures trapped in the hansom struggled madly like wild beasts in a cage. "Here are two of the suburban burglars, with their luggage, come to stay. Kindly help the two gentlemen out and make them comfortable while I go back for the third, who has arranged to wait for me."

IX

'TWIXT THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

"WHAT did you say?" asked Mr Beck, a little surprised, and half suspecting a joke.

"I want you to go to Hong-Kong."

There was no hint of merriment in the speaker's strong face or steady voice. Indeed, Mr Livingston was not a man at all given to jesting. High up in the service of Lloyds' great shipping insurance agency, he was reputed one of the shrewdest and gravest business men in the City. Mr Beck had met him in his inner sanctum by appointment this morning, and the result was this startling suggestion.

"To go to Hong-Kong?"

"Just so; starting in three days' time. Can you?"

"Of course I can. The real question is, will I? What is it for?"

"Well, it's this way. You know Joshua Marable?"

"Well; big shipowner and strike breaker."

"Those are the very words I wanted. You remember, of course, how he broke up the dockyard strike, imported coolies and all that. Well, the workmen never forgave him. There were threats

of dynamite at the time, and it seems they were meant. Last year there was an infernal machine found in the cellar of his house in Park Lane. It missed fire somehow, as these things do. But there was enough dynamite in it to blow up a row of houses, and the scoundrel who put it there was never caught.

"You were not on that job," he added, after a second's pause, and Mr Beck smiled genially at the implied compliment. "Unluckily," the other went on, "it did not end there. Marable, as perhaps you know, does the very cream of the Chinese trade —leaves the skimmed milk to the others. He carries only picked tea crops—the delicate tips you know, worth anything from five to ten shillings a pound, rich silks, and fine porcelain — regular shiploads of gold. He insures with us, and last year two of his vessels were lost. You follow me?"

Mr Beck nodded gravely.

"It was the biggest loss we have had for fifty years. Of the first of the vessels nothing was ever heard. It must have gone down with all hands on board. But from the other, one man, a doctor named Dalton, escaped by a miracle. He was a strong swimmer, and was in the sea for nine hours, clinging to a spar, before he was picked up. He told of a terrible explosion in mid-ocean that tossed him into the water like a cork. He is a shrewd fellow, mind you, and he does not think it was steam. There was no gunpowder on board, so—"

"You suspect dynamite?"

"You've hit it. We think a clockwork infernal

machine may have been put on board before they started. They can wind them, I believe, to go for a month; or perhaps the devil who did the job may have stepped off at some port they touched at and left the little keepsake behind him.

"Now, Marable is not a man to be put down. He's plucky, and straight as they make them, though perhaps a bit too hard when his blood is up. He has made up his mind to go the next trip himself in his own boat, *The Queen*—the newest and best of his fleet—which clears for Shanghai the day after to-morrow.

"He was here with me yesterday about the insurance. His impression is that his going himself may make things all square.

"I take a different view. I don't doubt he will keep a sharp eye out for his boat's sake and his own. But it seems pretty plain that this devilish plot is aimed at him, and the devils will be keen on the chance to send him and his boat to the bottom together. I want a better pair of eyes than his to watch. There are no man's eyes I would sooner trust than yours if you can go. Don't answer me for a moment," the agent went on hastily, as if he feared a refusal. "*The Queen* is a passenger as well as a cargo boat, and is as comfortable as the best. I have reserved two berths for you, and an assistant if you want one. It's a big thing, Mr Beck; I know that. I don't talk now of the fee, though naturally that would be a big thing, too. But you may save a shipload of people from a horrible death. Of course, there's the same risk for yourself; but—"

"I'll go," interrupted Mr Beck, quietly.

"I thought so," responded the other, with a shrewd smile; he knew it was the last few words that had caught his man. "Now, as to the fee—would a thousand pounds—"

"It's a gamble with death," said Mr Beck, gravely, "let us make it a complete gamble; nothing if I fail, two thousand if *The Queen* comes back safe to London; three if I catch the dynamitard."

"Done!" said Mr Livingston.

"Is the owner to know I'm going?"

"That rests with you. We leave the matter wholly in your hands. He knows nothing so far. Tell him or not, as you choose. Will you take an assistant?"

"Perhaps; I'll take the two berths anyway, if you don't mind. Well, I'm off. I've some things to see to before I start."

"Good-bye and good luck. I'll have much pleasure in drawing you a cheque for three thousand."

Two hours before *The Queen* started, Mr Beck stepped on board, carrying a big kit-bag, which constituted his entire equipment for China and back if Fate should see good to let him come back.

An hour later Mr Marable arrived, and Mr Beck, from a quiet corner, watched him come on board. He was a big, square man, with a big, round face, whose appearance claimed instant liking and respect. The large head was liberally thatched with a thick crop of wavy, light-brown hair, in which only a rare streak of silver showed. His blue eyes shone genially under thick eyebrows. His face was full of good-

humoured benevolence. Only the firm lips and the obtrusive chin hinted the fighting qualities of the man who had broken one of the fiercest strikes that London had ever known.

As was perhaps natural, he had much luggage, with which a couple of porters struggled, while he came on board carrying a large black bag. Mr Beck, who noted everything, noticed that the weight of this bag seemed to strain his strong right arm.

Captain Manley—a handsome, well-set-up young fellow—greeted the owner as he stepped on deck, and Mr Beck heard him say as they shook hands: "Miss Wilson has come, sir. I gave her the best berth."

"That's all right, my boy," replied Mr Marable, genially, and, following the porters, he went below with his luggage, still carrying the large black bag.

Sharp at the appointed hour the bell rang, and the vessel crept slowly out of her berth, feeling her way through the throng of shipping in the dock, and gathering speed as she went. It was dead calm, and when the harbour was cleared, and *The Queen* was cutting the water cleanly on an even keel, the passengers in the splendid saloon felt no hint of the swift motion that carried them eastwards.

All on board were seasoned sea-goers—all except one, and all but one settled down speedily and easily to the pleasant, lazy life on shipboard. The exception was Miss Haidée Wilson—a slim, pale, pretty girl, whom the doctors had sent on a long sea voyage for health's sake, and whose millionaire father, busy

about many things, had reluctantly intrusted her to the guardianship of his old friend Mr Marable.

She sat at the right hand of the captain at dinner in the sumptuous dining-saloon, resplendent with rare woodwork, with sea pictures let into the panels, but she hardly tasted the dainties abundantly provided. A sweet-faced girl was Miss Wilson, with a certain gentle languor of movement that added to her charm. Mr Marable sat at the captain's left hand, and Mr Beck some places down at the same table. The meal was invariably luxurious, worthy of the best hotel on shore; the fowl and the fish as fresh as if they had just come from the farmyard or the river.

They might have been on land again, for any suggestion of motion in that spacious saloon. The illusion of perfect rest was complete, save now and again as the great vessel, swinging ever so slowly to the smooth swell, gave a glimpse through a sinking port-hole of the blue sea and the white or red-sailed vessels that went racing past with the speed of their own swift motion.

Before they were three days out, something happened to send a current of excitement through the stagnation of quiet, every-day life on shipboard. Of the thirty passengers, one was missed. In the bustle of departure his absence had not been noticed. But when his place for three days stood vacant at the table, inquiries were made, and it was found that his luggage was in his berth, but no one had seen the man himself come aboard.

The incident stimulated a certain vague disquiet that was already abroad amongst the passengers, for

rumours of Mr Marable's misfortunes had gone about.

"Why," they whispered amongst themselves, "had this man funked the voyage at the last moment, after his luggage had come aboard?" and could find no satisfactory answer.

At a hint from Mr Beck, dropped casually in the captain's ear, the luggage was carefully examined, but nothing in the least dangerous or suspicious was found.

From the moment he had stepped on board Mr Beck's eyes and ears had been on the alert. He had nothing to go upon. It was his method to look out for his facts first, and work them into a theory afterwards, as a child fits the bits of a puzzle map into their places.

As he himself was fond of saying, he worked by rule of thumb. He searched all places, likely and unlikely. If he did not find what he expected, he lost no time in searching for it elsewhere. Experience had taught him to regard nothing as impossible, nothing as incredible. From the first he was inclined to suspect the owner, who pocketed the insurance money, and his curiosity was excited by the big, black dressing-bag which Mr Marable had carried so carefully aboard in his own hand.

After lunch one day, while Mr Marable, with a fragrant cigar between his lips and Miss Wilson on his arm, was pacing the long promenade deck, to which the rare combination of cool breeze and bright sunshine had tempted the passengers, Mr Beck stepped quietly into the owner's state-room with a skeleton key, which was an "open sesame" to most locks.

The black bag, which had tempted his curiosity, lay in a corner, and he began operations at once. The bag, as he expected, was very heavy for its size, but the lock was not by any means as facile as he anticipated. This increased Mr Beck's suspicions. Why so good and so rare a lock on a mere leather bag, which could be easily cut to pieces? But could it be cut to pieces?

He took a sharp-pointed borer from his tool-bag, and ran it into the bottom of the bag. The point grazed on a thin lining of fine steel. Mr Beck was more determined than ever to see the inside of the bag. A quarter of an hour, he thought, at the most, would do it, and he set to work fitting and filing his skeleton key.

The work was almost done, when he heard a quick, heavy step—a step that he knew was Mr Marable's—in the passage.

Mr Beck's nerves were of steel, but he may be pardoned if the sharp tool he was using at the moment slipped, and scratched the silver plating of the lock slightly, and scored his thumb deeply. He was almost caught in the act. The next moment he laid the bag softly in its place, and skipped into the berth behind the drawn curtains. Not a second too soon. Mr Marable came briskly into the state-room.

The curtains were still shaking, and, let it be confessed, Mr Beck was shaking too. The situation was delicate and trying. If he were caught he might perhaps clear himself of the charge of burglary, but only by revealing his real character of detective.

But the alternative was not pleasant. To explain

his presence he must confess that he suspected the owner of a design to blow up his own vessel and all on board. Mr Beck had had many close squeaks in his adventurous life, but he never felt himself in a tighter place than when he crouched breathless behind those curtains.

Mr Marable came hastily and breathlessly into the room, and glanced sharply around. Fortunately the shaking curtains were out of range of that first look. He picked the black bag from the floor, drew the keys from his pocket, and for a moment it seemed as if he would unlock it. But he changed his mind, and put it down unopened. Then he walked to the dressing-table, and touched his hair lightly with a silver-backed brush and twisted the ends of his moustache.

Amusement struggled with Mr Beck's fright as he watched. Mr Marable was the last man on earth that one would have suspected of personal vanity.

Finally, he saw him take a fine cambric handkerchief from a drawer in the wardrobe, sprinkle on it a few drops of perfume, crush it into the pocket of his lounge coat, and turn for the door.

Mr Beck's courage rose at his departure. It was an accidental interruption after all; the man suspected nothing. Then, while Mr Beck was chuckling at his escape, Mr Marable paused just at the door, turned, and stepped back straight across the cabin to the berth. His hand was on the curtain, and Mr Beck's heart was in his mouth, when Mr Marable changed his mind again, dropped the curtain, which he had raised a little, and went out without looking

back or closing the door behind him. As the sound of his footsteps died away down the passage, Mr Beck made a dash like a ferreted rabbit for his own cabin.

Still his suspicions were not wholly appeased. He felt he must get another look at the black bag, so the next morning, when he found Mr Marable lolling with a book and a cigar on deck, he tried a new lead.

"Might I disturb you for a moment?"

Mr Marable looked up lazily, but with a smile that invited disturbance.

"I think I saw you reading *The Royal Magazine* yesterday," said Mr Beck, smoothly. "If you have quite finished with it there is an article I should like very much to see—"

"Certainly," interrupted Mr Marable, courteously. "It's in my cabin; I'll fetch it."

"Oh, don't trouble," said Mr Beck, "if I might be allowed?"

"You are very good," yielded Mr Marable, lazily, "you'll find the magazine on the table, or in one of the drawers. Seven is the number of the cabin."

The black bag was on the table when Mr Beck got to the cabin. He pounced on it swiftly and silently as a panther on its prey. He had his skeleton key in his hand ready, but it was not needed. The bag was unlocked this time, and opened at a touch, and the detective found he was all wrong. It was a perfectly innocent bag that lay open before him—a dressing-case and a dispatch-box combined. There were heavy gold toilet fittings, and documents

which Mr Beck could see at a glance were of immense importance. The steel lining was covered on the inside with dark blue silk. Mr Beck examined the bag thoroughly, and then put it down with a little sigh, in which surprise and relief were curiously blended.

"Found what you wanted?" asked Mr Marable, as he passed him on the deck.

"Yes," Mr Beck answered courteously, "I found exactly what I wanted."

Yet he did not read his magazine when he got to his seat, but sat thinking, with his fingers between the pages. It was always his way when one door was closed in his face to look hard for another opening.

As a result of his thinking he spoke to Mr Marable as they came together on deck after dinner for the inevitable smoke.

"Could I have a word or two with you, sir, on private and important business?"

"Certainly, old chap. Fire away!"

"It is too important and too private to be talked of here."

Mr Marable looked at the grave face, and grew grave in sympathy.

"Come down to my state-room," he said and led the way.

"To begin with," said Mr Beck, when the door of the state-room had been closed and locked behind them, "let me introduce myself. I am a detective. I have been employed by Lloyds' people to look after this dynamite business on your vessels. My name is Beck—you may have heard of me."

"Heard of you! Of course I have. Seen your picture in the illustrated papers. Stupid of me not to know you at the first look. Delighted you've come, Mr Beck, the very man for the job," and he stretched a welcoming hand to the detective.

"Wait," said Mr Beck, "I have a confession to make first. You mayn't be so ready to shake hands with me afterwards. Yesterday I stole into your state-room and tried to burglarise your black bag. I had almost succeeded when you came in by chance. I hid behind those curtains."

Mr Marable's face was a picture of blank amazement. "By Jove!" was all he could stammer out.

Mr Beck went on quietly: "I made a pretence of that magazine to get into your cabin to-day. I found the black bag on the table open, and I examined it carefully."

Mr Marable found his tongue at last, too amazed it seemed for anger. "Why, you don't mean to say you suspected me of those devilish outrages?"

"I only mean to say that I thought it my duty to investigate thoroughly. I think it my duty now to tell you and to invite your confidence and help in my future investigations."

Mr Marable remained silent for a moment. His genial face had grown grave, almost stern. But there was no anger in his voice, when he spoke at last.

"I don't deny, Mr Beck," he said, "that I feel deeply humiliated by what you have just told me. It is horrible to have been suspected, even for one moment, of so hideous a crime. But I hope I am a

just man, and I have no right to be angry. You did not know me personally; it was your duty, as you say, to investigate everything, to suspect everyone. I am glad you told me. It was plucky and straightforward of you. Let bygones be bygones. Of course I will help you all I can in your quest."

The very next morning there was more matter for investigation. A ghost had been seen in one of the corridors about midnight by Miss Wilson as she went to fetch a book from the saloon. It moaned and she fainted. That was all she knew. But the story was supplemented by the steward, who reported that a bottle of champagne and a chicken had been stolen from the pantry.

The captain held a council of war in his own room, a council consisting of the owner, Miss Wilson and the steward. At Mr Marable's suggestion Mr Beck was specially invited to the consultation.

The lady and the steward told their story.

Miss Wilson was very pale and wonderfully pretty. She had not yet recovered from her fright. "I'm ashamed of myself," she said; "but I am so afraid of ghosts. If I had thought it was a man I would have grabbed him."

"Anyone would have been frightened," murmured the captain, sympathetically, but he did not himself look like a man whom it would be easy to frighten.

"Don't fret, my dear young lady," broke in Mr Marable, briskly. "The fellow cannot escape us unless he is able to swim a thousand miles or so to the nearest land.

"He is on board for no good, that's certain," he

added as an afterthought. "Likely as not he is at the bottom of this horrible dynamite business. What do you say, Mr Beck—do you begin to see light?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he had something to do with it," said Mr Beck, judiciously; "he may help us to the truth, but you've first got to catch your hare, as the cookery books remark."

"How do you mean to catch him?" cried Miss Wilson, with the liveliest interest.

"That ought to be a simple job enough, my dear young lady. We'll set a little trap for him, and bait it with a bottle of champagne. Have you by any chance such a thing as a reel of fine black thread, silk preferred?"

"Certainly; in my cabin."

"Will you be good enough to fetch it?"

"First tell me your plan, please. I cannot understand how the black thread can catch him."

She pleaded so prettily that Mr Beck smiled and yielded. He was human, and never could resist a pretty girl's pleading. "It is simplicity itself," he said. "I will have a bottle of champagne left where our midnight marauder will be likely to find it, with one end of your black thread tied to the neck of the bottle. The reel will run out as he goes. He cannot see it, of course, in the dark. He will carry the bottle to his hiding-place. Then, even if he breaks the thread off it doesn't matter. The next morning—"

"Oh, I see, I see," she cried delightedly; "how simple and clever! I'll fetch the thread at once; I love to be in a game of this kind."

The young captain looked as if he also loved to be in a game of some kind with the same player, but he said nothing.

Mr Beck's trap caught the bird. Next morning a line of thin black thread lay along the snow-white deck, with the end almost under one of the boats that hung at the davits, covered over with tarpaulin.

A couple of stout seamen went up the davits to the boat, and in a moment the stowaway was dragged from his hiding-place.

It was not by any means a prepossessing figure that stood on the deck in a long white night robe confronting the stern captain, amid a crowd of passengers standing around, amazed and angry, and buzzing with indignation like a swarm of startled bees.

He was a pale, lank youth—very pale and thin—with a receding forehead and lantern jaws and eyes devoid of all expression but utter bewilderment. He seemed to have been suddenly snatched out of a sound sleep, and unable to realise clearly what had happened to him. Perhaps the bottle of champagne drunk overnight had something to do with his bewilderment.

The passengers were wild with rage, convinced that the sneaking, murderous dynamitard had been caught at last. They would have tossed him overboard there and then if the captain had not interposed.

"Easy, gentlemen," he said, stepping in front of the stowaway, "easy, ladies," for the women were as furious as the men. "The chap must have fair

play, whatever he is. I will see what he has to say for himself in my cabin. You will come, Mr Marable, and you, Mr Beck? "

"May I come too, captain?" whispered Miss Wilson.

"Certainly," replied the captain; "you are one of our committee of public safety."

The stowaway had got rid of a good deal of his fright by the time they had all come to the captain's cabin. Now he stood upon his privileges; he even posed as an injured person.

"My passage is paid for," he blustered. "I have a right to be on board." To their amazement he produced the order for his berth and his card—Ernest Archer.

"Then why the—" the captain began angrily, but he caught Miss Wilson's eye and broke off confused. Miss Wilson's presence saved Mr Archer some particularly strong language.

"The captain wants to know," chipped in Mr Beck, politely, "why you didn't go to your cabin like an ordinary Christian, instead of roosting in that boat? "

"Oh, that, sir," retorted Mr Archer, "is capable of very easy, and so far as I am concerned, very creditable explanation. I had heard of the dynamite outrages on board Mr Marable's vessels. I have, I may say without boasting, a curious gift for amateur detective work, which has heretofore been practised only in my own domestic concerns. In this voyage I had hoped to combine duty with pleasure. From my station of secret observation overlooking the vessel—"

"Under a heavy tarpaulin," growled the captain.

"Overlooking the vessel," repeated Mr Archer, firmly, with a reproving eye on the interrupter. "I hoped to be able to detect the perpetrators of this abominable outrage. Your intrusion on my privacy has robbed me of that hope."

He spoke like a man with a grievance. The four eyed each other amazedly.

"Well, of all the cool, confounded donkeys," began the captain, when Mr Beck interrupted again.

"Perhaps we might be able to discuss the matter better in the absence of this gentleman," he suggested.

Mr Archer was removed by two able-bodied seamen, both labouring under a strong desire to wring his neck.

"What is Mr Marable's opinion?" said Mr Beck, deferentially, when the door closed behind them.

"I say, let the fellow loose," responded Mr Marable, promptly.

"Pitch him overboard to the sharks; that's my vote," said the captain. "I've no fancy to sail in such company."

"Oh!" commented Miss Wilson, with so much reproach in her voice that the captain was instantly converted.

"I mean," he added lamely, "we might lock him up safely somewhere; feed him well, of course, and all that, till the ship gets safely to shore."

He looked humbly for approval to Miss Wilson, who refused it.

"My dear sir," interposed Mr Marable, smoothly, "you need not be alarmed for your ship and

passengers;" and he glanced shyly at the lady passenger. "Of course, we will keep close watch that the fellow does not leave the vessel. We can trust our good friend, Mr Beck, for that."

"But," protested the young lady, "I don't believe he is a dynamitard. I'm sure he isn't."

"I rather think he is, myself," remarked Mr Marable, placidly; "that's why I propose to let him loose. He won't willingly blow himself up, and he cannot blow up the ship without blowing up himself. But he may have set an infernal machine somewhere, believing he could escape. If so, we must give him a chance to unset it. Perhaps we may even catch him and his playthings together if we look sharp."

Mr Beck sat silent, listening patiently, and glancing from one speaker to another. All of them now turned instinctively to him, willing to accept his verdict.

"If I may express an opinion," he said modestly, under compulsion of their looks, "I entirely agree with Mr Marable. Our best chance of catching the criminal—if there be a criminal on board to catch—is to let this man go free."

"I'm sure he is innocent," persisted Miss Wilson.

"I'm beginning to think so myself," chimed in the captain, shamelessly.

"Anyhow we must all say so," enjoined Mr Beck, persuasively; "there must be no hint of suspicion. Mr Archer must enter the saloon without a stain on his character. The captain will inform the passengers that his game of hide-and-seek was a harmless frolic."

The passengers accepted the captain's statement

without demur. Mr Archer was freely received and turned out a much pleasanter person than was expected. He was a wonderful card juggler, sang a good comic song, and knew how to make himself generally agreeable.

The captain alone did not warm to the newcomer. But Miss Wilson was particularly gracious. Mr Archer was an adept at deck games, and she played with him constantly. A charming picture she made, her hair tossed loose by the wind as she poised and darted the wooden shovel, and sent the wooden disc gliding along the slippery deck. But the captain did not love Mr Archer a bit better for his part in the picture.

Watching from the isolated grandeur of the bridge he was more and more convinced that Archer was a deep-dyed criminal. So much attention did he give to their sport and so little to his duties that it is a marvel he did not run the vessel on the nearest desert island.

Mr Beck, too, watched the newcomer closely. He had speedily wormed himself into Archer's confidence and friendship. They had long confidential talks together, or played chess—a game to which they were both addicted—until the small hours of the morning.

Mr Marable more than once congratulated Mr Beck on his adroitness, and Mr Beck modestly replied: "Congratulate me, sir, when I have caught my man, not before."

Meanwhile the swift vessel sped on her allotted course over the wide curve of the blue Pacific, through calm waters under peaceful skies, carrying her load of human life and mystery and crime.

There was a wireless telegraphic installation on board, and messages from passing ships, or from land they neared or left, were a great source of amusement to the passengers as they swept on and on under the wide, empty, covering dome of the sky.

By degrees Archer slipped out of Miss Wilson's good graces, and Captain Manley stepped in.

It was all the difference between jest and earnest. A new light came to her eyes, a new colour to her cheek, health and happiness visited her together. Her other admirers—and every man on board was her admirer—soon realised that the captain had won, and gave place to the victor.

Only Mr Marable seemed dissatisfied; if the thing were not absurd one would have said he was jealous of the captain's good fortune. But Mr Marable was old enough to be the girl's father. He kept himself well in hand as a rule, but once or twice he was snappish to the captain without cause, and once he spoke of him disparagingly to Haidée till silenced by her sudden anger.

The very next day after their tiff she came to him with the news of her engagement to Captain Manley. To her surprise he was warm in his congratulations. "You must forgive me if I was a bit nasty of late," he said. "I was dreaming that perhaps—well, what does it matter what an old fool dreams? I am awake now all right, and I hope you will be happy—I am sure you will be happy. You may trust me to do what I can to make matters smooth for you at home." After that he was more civil than ever to the captain.

Still the swift vessel raced ever eastward over the monotonous ocean, and the sun rose and set, and the

next day was like the last, till one memorable morning land showed—a smudge on the far-off line of the horizon where the dark blue of the sea met the light blue of the sky. Before evening that same day the good ship pushed her way slowly, zigzag, in and out, amid the crowded shipping in the harbour of Hong-Kong, and her passengers rejoined again the living world of men.

All was bustle and excitement on board. The passengers who had met as strangers at the beginning of the voyage parted as old friends at its close. They were loth to lose sight of each other for ever as the land absorbed them.

Only Haidée Wilson, Joshua Marable and Mr Archer remained on board.

Mr Archer knew no one in Hong-Kong and had no business there. He had taken a return ticket, and from first to last protested that he had come out and was going back in his self-appointed *role* of private detective. He grew a little restless, however, while they lay in harbour, and once or twice was anxious to go ashore, but Mr Beck at one time and Marable at another dissuaded him.

"He does not quit the vessel," the captain declared, "until the last man has landed safe in the London Docks, if I have to clap him in irons to hold him."

But Haidée Wilson only laughed at her lover, and declared the man was as much a dynamitard as she was.

Meanwhile Mr Marable was very busy getting his precious cargo of delicate teas and rich silks and fine porcelain on board. Mr Archer, perhaps for the lack of other occupation, took a deep interest in the

cargo, and more than once was found in the hold, to Mr Marable's manifest annoyance.

The work went briskly forward. The vast piles of cargo vanished in smooth sequence into the hold. Order grew again out of confusion. New passengers were shipped until the total of thirty was complete.

Many were refused and returned to shore disconsolate, for *The Queen* was the most popular boat that sailed in these waters, and Captain Manley the most popular captain.

It was a fine, sunshiny morning, hot and still. Not a breeze stirred the air, not a ripple moved on the glassy waters when *The Queen*, amid cheers and the waving of handkerchiefs, edged slowly out from the dock wall through the maze of shipping and set her prow straight across the wide curve of the great globe back to the little island—a tiny speck in the far-off western sea.

Smoothly the vessel moved, and slowly at first, as loth to leave the land. There followed in her wake an evil companionship of sharks—hideous, swift-gliding shadows whose dorsal fins showed like rough cactus leaves over the still clear water and ripped it into long ripples as they moved.

The Queen had passed the harbour mouth and had glided out into the open sea when the bell rang of itself in the secluded cabin amidships, and an electric message quivered through the ether from Hong-Kong five miles away.

"Owner wanted for an hour. Urgent.—CHIN HANG."

Mr Marable was surprised and annoyed by the

untimely message and at first seemed disposed to disregard it.

"You cannot afford to bring the ship back again," he said to the captain, "for this tomfoolery. Chin Hang is always in a fuss. What can he have to say now that he could not have said before we parted?"

"We could send a boat, sir," the captain suggested, "and lie by for you here."

"How long would it take?"

"You should be there and back again in four hours at the outside."

"All right," grumbled Mr Marable. "I suppose I ought to go, but it's a nuisance all the same. Look lively, captain, the sooner we get off the sooner we get back."

But they did not get off as soon as he expected. The morning dragged slowly away in unexpected delays.

First Mr Archer manifested a sudden and passionate desire to go back with Mr Marable. He insisted and protested. It was his last chance, he cried, of a peep at Hong-Kong. Mr Marable and Mr Beck were polite and diplomatic in their persuasions. But it needed a curt and stern refusal from Captain Manley to cut short his importunity.

Then, to the surprise of everyone, Mr Beck wanted to go, and even got down into the boat. He had very special reasons, he said, for making the request, but he refused to tell what his special reasons were, and Mr Marable with manifest impatience reminded him that it was more necessary than ever to keep a watch on Mr Archer.

Unlike Mr Archer, however, Mr Beck yielded with a good grace, and admitted that after all his duty was on shipboard.

Nearly an hour was wasted in this fashion, and Mr Marable seemed feverish and impatient to be off.

Yet, when at the last moment he met Haidée Wilson on deck, he delayed a moment or two more in an attempt to induce her to come with him. "Just a pleasant few hours' row," he urged, "and back again."

"No, no," she said, "I stick to the ship."

"And the captain," he added, smiling.

"Good-bye," she said with a swift blush as she turned from him to the rails.

"*Au revoir*," he responded gaily, and with his black bag in his hand he went down the ladder at last to the boat.

"Now, my men," he cried impatiently as he settled on his seat, "give way. I'm in a deuce of a hurry." The four oars lifted together for the stroke.

But before the blades could splash in the water Mr Beck, leaning over the rail, cried out loudly:

"Mr Marable!"

"Curse you," growled Mr Marable in a sudden burst of anger, "what is it now?"

"I've put your black bag in the locker."

"The black bag is here," said the coxswain, lifting it in his hand.

"The other one I mean," cried Mr Beck. "Mr Marable knows there are two."

With a howl of fear and rage like a wild beast

trapped, Mr Marable leapt from his seat, stumbled blindly towards the locker, and made desperate efforts to force it open.

"It's locked," cried Mr Beck's imperturbable voice from high above him. "Here's the key!"

He tossed the key into the air as he spoke, but it fell short of the boat and dropped with a splash amongst the sharks.

Then Mr Marable seemed suddenly to go mad. He growled and snarled in inarticulate rage and foamed at the mouth, while he tore frantically at the locker till his finger nails were broken. Furiously he pounded it with his naked fists. His bruised hands made blood-marks on the wood. His terror was contagious; the crew in the boat and the crowd gathered at the ship's side watched him in utter, speechless bewilderment.

Suddenly, before anyone could guess his purpose, he turned and leapt with a great shout from the boat's edge into the sea. He never rose again! The long ripples his plunge made quivered and grew calm. Far down in the still water a throng of ghastly shadows met with darting of sharp snouts and the gleam of white bellies. They snapped and tugged and tore. A dark stain rose through the clear water. It curdled into crooked streaks, showed for a moment on the surface like red veining of green marble, and then faded and vanished.

The crowd gazed silently, horror-struck at the sudden, mysterious tragedy. Then a clamour broke out of mingled wonder and pity.

Mr Beck's stern voice was heard above the clamour.

"It is just," he said; "he deserves no pity. The dynamitard has met his doom!"

The detective's genial face was pale and stern and pitiless as death. A hush fell on the clamouring crowd as they caught the meaning of his words.

"He meant to blow up the ship. He thought his own infernal machine was in the boat with him," Mr Beck curtly explained to the men and women that crowded round him excitedly. "Thank God for your lives. You shall know all presently. Meanwhile I must have a word with the captain."

While the boat and boat's crew were brought back over the ship's side, Mr Beck went below with the captain to his cabin.

Captain Manley was pale as a sheet.

"It was horrible!" he said hoarsely.

"It was just," retorted Mr Beck, sternly. "I have no pity for him. Think what he has done, what he meant to do! He meant death for us all, even the sweet girl whom his friend gave in his charge. Just think of it!"

"I daren't," said the captain in a whisper. "I daren't. You are quite sure?"

"Sure as fate. So shall you be."

"But how?" began the captain again, when Mr Beck smilingly interposed.

"Just luck," he said complacently—he was his genial self again—"my never-failing luck. I began poking about blindly a few days after I came on board and thought I'd have a peep into the big black bag he was so careful about, and failed. He almost caught me in the act. I tried again the next day and found a big black bag open for me to examine.

But it wasn't the same black bag, though, it was a duplicate. I had scraped the lock of the first the day before when I was trying to open it, ever such a little scrape, but there was no scrape at all on the lock of the second.

"Mr Marable, I found, kept two identical black bags—one for show and the other for use. That seemed a bit suspicious?"

"Very," assented the captain.

"Well, I knew then that he had spotted me, and so I made a virtue of a necessity, introduced myself as a detective, and told him the whole story of my visit to his cabin, with humble apologies for my suspicion, that threw him completely off his guard."

"But what about Mr Archer?" queried the captain.

"My assistant," said Mr Beck, quietly. "We planned that little comedy between us to give the real criminal, whoever he might be, a scapegoat, and Archer was very useful afterwards amongst the cargo.

"Captain Manley, you are carrying to England a load of chopped rice straw for tea, and old canvas bales for silk, and crockery ware worth twopence a ton for rare porcelain. But it was never meant to arrive."

"The infernal machine was not really in the boat's locker?" asked Captain Manley.

"Not likely! It is here." He lifted a black bag on the table. "You needn't start, captain. There's dynamite enough there to blow us all to blazes, but it won't go off this time. Marable set the clockwork when he was ready to leave the vessel, but I stopped

it a minute afterwards. Then I delayed his starting on one excuse or another, and kept him dancing like a bear on hot plates till it was time for his clock to strike. His other ships were plainly destroyed in much the same way."

"You saved every life on board," said the captain, and he gripped Mr Beck's hand so hard he knew he was thinking of Haidée Wilson.

Later on the crew and passengers were told the story and were allowed to examine the infernal machine for themselves, and at dinner the captain proposed the health of Mr Beck, and it was drunk amid cheers and tears.

The good ship *The Queen* came back to England without her owner, who was reported to have fallen overboard.

Though there was no official inquiry, the gruesome story crept abroad in various forms, none more horrible than the truth.

Mr Beck got his cheque for three thousand pounds, of which a hundred went to buy a wedding present for Captain and Mrs Manley.

THE UNSEEN HAND

The train checked its speed and rumbled slowly into Suberton Junction.

"Tickets, please, all tickets ready, please." Brisk men in uniform bustled up and down the platform, and carriages were opened and banged.

"Tickets, please. Oh! my God! What's this?"

The formal voice broke into a cry as the ticket collector pulled the carriage door open. For there, stretched on the floor in a crumpled heap, a man lay dead.

Unmistakably dead. No living body ever lay huddled up like that. There were great blotches and streaks of blood on the whitey-grey face, and, stooping a little, the ticket collector found that a portion of the skull had been battered in. A foul, sickening odour filled the carriage.

The sight and smell made him faint and dizzy, but he was a man of coolness and resource. He locked the carriage door and raced for the station-master—only just in time. The train was trembling into motion when at a word from the collector the station-master rushed on the platform and stopped it.

An instant tumult broke out amongst the passengers. There had been an accident on the line

a short time before, and the public nerves were still unstrung.

By magic the word got about—a man found dead in one of the carriages—and the curious crowd poured from many openings on to the platform. But the station-master, with his back to the door, drove them away.

"Take your seats," he shouted, "take your seats, or you will be left behind. We will side-track this carriage and send the train on."

Still the crowd pressed and fought for a peep into this chamber of horrors, fought as for some rich treat, the women worse than the men. In spite of the station-master noses were flattened against the carriage window, and there were guttural mutterings of horror, tainted with a repulsive enjoyment of the tragedy.

A tall young man, well built but languid, came out of a smoking carriage immediately in front—a good-looking young fellow, with straw-coloured moustache and light blue eyes, a cool, imperturbable dandy. He did not press and shoulder with the rest of the crowd, but with glass in his eye sauntered leisurely up to the station-master.

"Excuse me," said he politely, "my name is Albert Malwood. I think it possible it is my uncle. May I look?"

At a word from the station-master one of the porters made way for him to the window.

One look was sufficient. The eye-glass dropped from his eye, and his face was paler than before as he turned from the window, but his drawl was expressionless as ever.

"It was a good guess of mine, station-master; it is my uncle. I will stay and see this thing out."

He coolly took a seat on one of the wooden benches on the platform, and with fingers that trembled a little picked out a cigarette from a gold case and lit it.

The carriage in which the dead man lay was quickly side-tracked. But it was nearly half an hour before the train, with its load of excited, impatient occupants, again began to draw out of the station.

There had gone before them to the London terminus a note of their numbers, and a brief description of each. Two of Scotland Yard's sharpest men met the train on its arrival, and all the passengers were interrogated and closely examined—all except one.

A tall, graceful woman, who had been foremost in pressing to the window at the Suberton Junction, managed, by accident or design, to slip unobserved through the vigilant cordon of the police at London.

Before the train left the platform at Suberton Junction the station-master wired for instructions to headquarters, and in less than a quarter of an hour had his answer:

"Mr Paul Beck goes down by next train to take complete control."

The station-master had never heard of Mr Beck, but Albert Malwood had.

"Met him once," he drawled, "queer-looking cove in baggy trousers. Wouldn't take my fancy as a detective, but they say he's too awfully clever for anything."

When Mr Beck arrived from town an hour later

he surprised Mr Albert Malwood by recognising him at once.

"Sad business about your uncle, Mr Malwood, very sad." His voice was as impersonal as an undertaker's.

"Of course it is very sad, and all that kind of thing," said Albert, and his light blue eyes blinked rapidly, "and I'm very sorry for the old chap, who was always very decent. But I don't deny I have my consolations. I believe he has left everything in the world to me."

It sounded heartless, and the honest station-master stared at him aghast. But it did not need eyes as sharp as Mr Beck's to see that this was a pose, and that the young fellow felt his uncle's death deeply.

"Have a care, Mr Malwood," said Mr Beck, "that you are not suspected of murdering your uncle. You have most to gain by his death, you know."

"I'm sure I don't care," replied Mr Malwood, indifferently; "if it pleases the public to suspect they are quite welcome."

Together the three had come to the door of the carriage that held the ghastly murder mystery. Mr Beck sniffed inquisitively as he unlocked and opened it.

A wave of foul air met him full in the face.

"Asafœtida," he said. "Why on earth was he drinking asafœtida?"

"He often took it," volunteered the nephew, "as a stimulant for weak heart. Rather liked the beastly smell of the stuff. Hated smoking, though; that's why I travelled in the smoker by myself."

"Together the three had come to the door as he unlocked and opened it." Mr. Beck sniffed inquisitively

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But Mr Beck seemed not to hear. He was busy examining the glass and woodwork of the door. If he found anything he made no sign, but stepped softly into the carriage.

The dead man lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. There was that horrible wound on his head, plainly a blow from some dull weapon struck with superhuman force. The skull was beaten in as an eggshell is beaten in with a spoon.

"He was alone, you say, in the carriage?" queried Mr Beck.

"Quite alone, sir," answered the station-master. "Here is the collector who found him."

The man came forward awkwardly, yet eagerly withal. Plainly he was a little afraid of Mr Beck and his clues. One could not tell where they might lead.

"You looked under the seats, my man?"

"Yes, sir; there wasn't a mouse in the carriage."

"Don't suppose there was."

"The far door was locked," the station-master chimed in, "but both windows were down. I have had this man stationed at the door since the carriage came in. Nothing has been stirred."

Mr Beck nodded approvingly. Braving the abominable stench, he closely searched the carriage—a handkerchief pressed tight to his nostrils. A Gladstone bag was in the rack, and a book lay face downwards, marking the place, on one of the seats. There was nothing else in the carriage but the corpse, which lay huddled on the floor.

With a curious tenderness Mr Beck examined the

dead man, having first very gently closed the staring eyes.

The station-master—a puffy, self-important man—grew impatient at the prolonged silence.

"Must have struck his head as he fell—a fit, or something of that sort," he ventured.

He spoke in a whisper to the nephew, but Mr Beck heard, and pointed to the ghastly wound.

"No fall did that," he said; "no ordinary man could do it. There was two men's strength behind that blow, whoever struck it."

"But how?" the nephew asked. "The carriage was empty; there was no one to strike it."

"That's just what I have got to find out," said Mr Beck.

"A troublesome riddle," replied the other. "I wish you luck in solving it."

"Thank you, sir," said Mr Beck, gravely.

The young man spoke lightly, but Mr Beck could detect a note of deeper feeling in his voice.

"He and I were very good friends always," he added after a moment, as if excusing himself for his levity. The languid look had passed from his face. He was plainly much affected, as he turned aside from the carriage window and walked back alone along the platform.

Robbery was not the motive of the crime. The old man's money was in his pockets, his rings on his fingers, his heavy gold lever watch in his fob.

On the watch Mr Beck concentrated his attention. The pocket that held it lay under the corpse, and Mr Beck had to shift the body gently round to get at it. The watch must have struck the floor hard, for the

balance staff had snapped with the shock, and the watch stopped. But Mr Beck was not satisfied to take things for granted. It was only after a minute examination that he convinced himself that the evidence was not faked, that the fall had really broken the balance staff and stopped the watch.

"My luck again," he said to the station-master.

"Got a clue already?" asked the younger man, who had strolled back.

"A brace of them," answered the detective, cheerfully. "I've found all I'm likely to find here," he added after a moment.

"There must be an inquest, I suppose?" Albert Malwood said tentatively. "You see, I'm a child in these matters; never had a murder in the family before."

Mr Beck looked at him steadily for a moment. The genuine feeling in his face belied the silly affectation of his words.

"Of course there must be an inquest. Where would you wish it held, sir—in London?"

"Oh! no, not in London if it can possibly be avoided. Why not at his own place, Oakdale? It would be more convenient for the funeral arrangements; the family burying-place is close by. Besides, I'm anxious, I must confess, to keep the beastly business out of the newspapers as much as possible."

"I see no objection," said Mr Beck, after a moment's pause. Then to the station-master: "You can send the body back by a special train?"

The station-master nodded. "Certainly. I suppose I will be wanted over to give evidence. I can arrange that, too."

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr Beck. He knew the man could give no evidence to the point, but his ready assent made a fast friend of the station-master.

"To-morrow, then, at two," said Mr Albert Malwood. "That suit?"

"I'm afraid not. There are formalities to be observed. We must communicate with the county coroner and all that. We might manage the day after to-morrow."

"All right then. The day after to-morrow. I am anxious to have the business over and done with."

"The business won't be over and done with," Mr Beck objected gently, "until I catch the murderer or murderess as the case may be."

"If you ever do?"

"I have a notion I will."

"That's all right. Meanwhile we might be making a move."

In half an hour Mr Beck and Mr Albert Malwood were in the first-class carriage of a special train on their way to Oakdale. The body of old Squire Malwood returned in a van to his ancestral home.

Mr Albert Malwood smoked cigarettes incessantly, and talked of the murder with languid wonder.

"Couldn't be suicide, of course?" he ventured.

Mr Beck answered an emphatic "no" to that. "There was no weapon of any kind in the carriage," he explained, "the blow killed instantly. It was a blow that the old man could not have struck even with the full sweep of his arms and a heavy weapon in his hands. A blacksmith's hammer struck with a

blacksmith's arm might have given such a blow. Count suicide out of the case, Mr Malwood."

"But how—?" began Mr Malwood again, when he was interrupted by the train's coming to a standstill at the station, and a porter's voice shouting "Oakdale."

"Our station," he said to Mr Beck, pleasantly enough. "I have telegraphed for a trap to meet us."

The trap—a light, high dog-cart—was in waiting, drawn by an American trotter, and the two men drove together to Oakdale. The languid Mr Malwood proved himself a superb whip. With wrists of steel he held the fresh, hard-mouthed trotter steadily to his work, while they flew at motor speed along a switchback country road bordered with great elms.

It was a still, calm, sunshiny afternoon, but the swish of the cool air was pleasant in their faces with a breeze born of their own speed. The rise and fall of the road gave momentary glimpses of a country fair and rich with many handsome houses showing through the trees. Mr Beck, who was a keen lover of Nature, was seemingly absorbed in the calm beauty of the landscape, while Mr Malwood impassively smoked cigarette after cigarette, seemingly oblivious alike of the great beast that tugged at the reins, of the detective who sat by his side, of the pleasant country through which they sped, and of the ghastly mystery in which he was so nearly concerned.

They had gone nearly a quarter of an hour in silence, and were a good four miles on their way, when Mr Beck spoke.

"I want to get to London to-morrow," he said;

" important business. I can be back for the inquest next day."

Mr Malwood nodded.

" How are the trains? " asked Mr Beck.

" You can catch the morning train after an early breakfast, the one my poor uncle and myself caught to-day. There is a fast train that brings you here from London about twelve next day. Suppose we say one o'clock for the inquest? "

" That will do nicely," assented Mr Beck, genially, as if they were fixing the day and hour for a picnic.

Presently the road widened a little, and a great gate of wrought ironwork showed on the left. The pulling horse was brought to a stand as sharply as a motor by the brake.

" Gate! " cried Mr Malwood, and an old woman, apple-faced and comely, came out of a red-tiled Gothic gate-lodge smothered in roses, and with an old-fashioned curtsey turned the big key and swung the heavy gate wide.

Mr Beck was astonished at the extent and splendour of the grounds. The oaks which gave its name to the place fenced the avenue in stately double row, standing well back in the grass. Clumps of oak dotted the lawn, and in the middle distance merged into a wood. Rabbits tumbled over the grass under the trees. Now the graceful form of deer showed through the windows of the wood, and now and again a pheasant hurtled up clumsily from the underbrush, as if he would tear the thick shrubs up by the roots.

The horse went with a rush through the long avenue, and was brought up almost on his haunches

on the wide gravel sweep opposite the stone steps, broad and high, that led to the massive door which opened of itself at their approach.

The news of the tragedy had come before them. It was writ plain on the faces of the footmen who stood at the open door under the portico at the top of the high steps beside the tall, Ionic pillars of grey limestone, their gay liveries strangely out of keeping with the sombre background. Plainer still the tragedy was written on the face of the stout, middle-aged man who stood behind the footmen in the great square hall.

That face startled Mr Beck with a sudden twinge of recollection. He knew it and he didn't know it. He found the key to the puzzle in a second. It resembled closely the face of the man murdered in the railway carriage. The resemblance was not so much in shape or feature, but in curious identity in expression that grows between people—husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, servants and masters, who have lived long together in close association.

" Jennings the butler," said Mr Malwood, following the questioning look in the detective's eyes. " Lived with the squire, man and boy, for over fifty years. Surly old cock—never liked him myself."

Mr Beck caught the momentary look that Jennings gave his new master from under lowering brows, and decided there was no love lost between them.

" I would like to have a word or two with the butler," he said, " if there is time."

" Lots of time," the young man answered lightly, " we dine in an hour."

Mr Beck found Jennings cautious, almost sullen at first. To the detective's discerning eyes it was plain that the man laboured under some deep emotion in which grief and anger struggled for mastery. But he was one of those men whose feelings are not articulate. If he were sorry for his master with whom he had lived so long and so intimately, he at least gave no sign of sorrow. But there were few men—or women for that matter—who could resist Mr Beck's genial persuasiveness.

"Sit down, Mr Jennings," he said. They were alone in a small study to the right of the hall. "You know I have been engaged to find out who murdered your master?"

Mr Jennings sat down, but for a long minute he spoke no word. Mr Beck waited patiently.

"You will have your work cut out for you, sir," said the butler at last. "The man that did that deed don't mean to get caught."

"I want your help," Mr Beck went on smoothly. "You need not tell me you were fond of the squire; I know it, and I know, too, you will help if you can."

The butler merely nodded with face wholly expressionless.

"Did the squire intend yesterday to go to London to-day?" queried Mr Beck.

"No, sir, I'm nearly sure not. He would have told me."

"What made him go?"

"A letter he got at breakfast. It was in a woman's handwriting, and the squire opened it carelessly, as if he did not know the writing. But it caught hold

of him the very first line. His face turned red and white as he read, and the tears were in his eyes. He sat for a minute with the letter open on the table under his hand, thinking. Then he seemed to make up his mind. 'Read that, Albert,' he says, and passes it over across the small, round table to his nephew.

"Master Albert read it slowly in that quiet, easy way of his. It might have been a paragraph in the newspaper for any sign he gave.

"'You must go up to London at once, sir,' he said immediately, 'it's your plain duty.'

"I never in my life saw a man so pleased as what the squire was at that. He bounced up from his seat and stretched a hand across the table to Mr Albert. 'You're the best chap in the world, Albert,' he cried, 'and the most generous. I always thought it, now I am sure of it. I'll take care you don't lose by this, my boy. You're right, you're right; I'll go at once. You've made it very easy for me. Jennings, tell them to have the brougham to meet the morning train.'"

"Who kept the letter?" asked Mr Beck.

"Mr Albert, sir. I saw him ram it into his pocket as I left the room."

More and more it was made plain that Jennings hated the young man and would fix suspicion on him if he could.

"When I came back to the breakfast parlour," he went on, "through the room we're in now, I saw Mr Albert standing at the desk there in the corner. He crossed from that over to the big medicine chest yonder. The squire always kept a medicine chest.

You see, he was at the medical profession before he came in for the estate, and liked to physic the tenants. Mr Albert was standing opposite the medicine chest with his back to me when I went in to the squire.

" 'Look alive, Jennings,' the master cried, 'or we'll miss the train. I have been an old fool, my man, but things have come right in spite of me.'

" I never saw the squire looking better or happier in my life. Five minutes later I saw him step into the brougham. Mr Albert followed him. That was the last I saw of my old master—the last I ever shall see of him." The old man's voice shook.

Mr Beck was examining the writing-table; he turned to the butler with that look of genuine sympathy with which he so often captured confidence.

" It was a cruel murder, Mr Jennings," he said. " You would like to catch the man that did it? "

" And hang him," cried Jennings, with a sudden burst of savagery. His voice implied that he suspected someone. Perhaps he meant Mr Beck to press him for his suspicion, but Mr Beck went on quietly examining the little table.

It was in perfect order. Letters neatly arranged in piles under paper-weights. One bundle of letters, however, took his attention. It had fallen sideways on the desk. He took a paper or two, and glanced through them. Then he beckoned to Mr Jennings.

" Had your master more paper-weights than those two? " he asked.

Mr Jennings seemed startled.

"I didn't notice it before, sir," he said; "but there was another weight, the biggest of the three—a square of black marble with a bronze Cupid on top."

"Ah! indeed," observed Mr Beck, and moved to the medicine chest. Everything there also was in perfect order. The squire was plainly a man of method. The cork of the bottle of asafœtida had been drawn and replaced. A third of the contents was gone.

Mr Beck drew the cork again, and held the bottle to the nose of the butler, who sniffed in violent disgust.

"Ever know the squire to smell of this stuff?"

"Never, sir, never," he spluttered emphatically.

"Thank you, Mr Jennings, that will do. I won't trouble you any more."

"Dinner will be ready, sir, in half an hour," said Jennings, at once relapsing into the formal butler, as he glanced at a solid gold watch. "Shall I show you to your room, sir?"

There was no allusion to the murder at dinner by host or guest. Young Mr Malwood was plainly a man of deeper feeling than his lackadaisical appearance and manner would suggest. He seemed to shrink from the very thought of the tragedy, and Mr Beck respected his feelings by silence.

The detective was up betimes next morning, before Mr Malwood was out of bed. He had a solid breakfast by himself, and through Jennings' intervention got the fast trotter harnessed, and was at the railway station an hour and a half too soon for his train.

Nor did he waste his spare time. First he had a friendly chat with the station-master, who in his turn had a word with the guard.

Then with a permit from the station-master in his pocket, Mr Beck set out for a walk along the line which ran from just outside the town between two high and smooth embankments.

Mr Beck walked slowly, with his eyes searching the ground. He walked about a mile on one side of the line and found nothing.

Then he crossed over and walked back on the other. He was half-way back when he came upon a few scraps of white paper lying beside the rails. Plainly it had been raining when they were thrown from the window of the carriage, for instead of drifting away with the wind, they lay fairly close together.

Kneeling down Mr Beck gathered the fragments tenderly into his big hand. With fingers and eyes dexterous from much use, he set a few of the pieces together like a puzzle map, and read. Not a dozen words he read, but it was enough. Plainly he read what he expected to read, for he dried and smoothed the bits of paper tenderly with a silk handkerchief, and put them gently away in his capacious pocket-case.

" My luck," he said softly. " The rest ought to be easy to find."

The rest *was* easy to find. Two hundred yards farther on he found, half hidden in the grass, a small squirt, such as druggists sell and children love to play with, the body an indiarubber ball, the nozzle of black bone.

Mr Beck smelt the nozzle. It had the smell of asafœtida.

Plainly this part of Mr Beck's work was over, for he walked back at once to the station, filled his pipe, got a morning paper, smoked and read complacently, especially the political news, for a good half hour, until his train puffed impatiently into the station.

He found a first-class carriage reserved to himself.

With a cheery "Good-morning, sir, the guard knows. It will be all right," his new-found friend, the station-master, walked by the carriage door, quickening his steps to keep up with it until the train outpaced him.

Mr Beck took out his watch as they cleared the station. "Twenty-five minutes," he said, put the watch back, and resumed his paper. Twenty minutes later, however, the paper was put aside in its turn for the watch.

His eyes were glued on the dial as the minutes went slowly by, one to each mile.

"One! Two! Three! Four!" At four, Mr Beck jumped from his seat and jerked the communication-cord. The brakes suddenly gripped the wheels, and straining and jarring, the train pulled suddenly to a standstill.

Every head was out of the windows as Mr Beck, stepping briskly from his carriage, got down beside the train, and waved a signal with his handkerchief to the guard.

Almost instantly the train again stole into motion, and the long row of carriages, with staring eyes at every window, swept past the imperturbable Mr Beck.

The train had vanished round a distant curve before he made a move. "Should be on the same side," he said, as he paced slowly along the line with head bent close to the ground.

This time the search was short. He had timed the place to a nicety. Not fifty yards from where he alighted he found a heavy paper-weight—a square of polished black marble with a small bronze Cupid at the top.

"That ends it," said Mr Beck; "now to find the woman and bring her back with me."

Another set of passengers were astonished a little later to see the next fast train for London stop short in mid career to pick up a solitary passenger who sat waiting for it on a bank beside the line as a countryman might wait for a cart at a cross road.

When Mr Beck drove over to Oakdale next day at about noon for the inquest he brought with him a handsome, dark young woman, tall and well formed, though a little thin and worn as from mental strain or watching.

Her pale face was pleasant to look at until she came in sight of Mr Malwood; then for a moment it darkened with a sudden spasm of anger or fear, or both.

"An important witness," said Mr Beck, pleasantly, but made no further effort to introduce them to each other.

Mr Malwood, for his part, seemed as easy and unconcerned as ever. No casual onlooker would imagine that an inquest was about to be held on the murdered body of the uncle who had been a father to him.

But Mr Beck's keen eyes looked through the pose and saw the man was deeply moved.

With all his easy ways, Mr Malwood had been indefatigable in making ready, as quickly and quietly as possible, for the inquest. Not so quietly, however, as he could have wished. One London newspaper had somehow got hold of the news and sent down its representative.

The business was promptly got under way. Half an hour after Mr Beck's arrival the jury was sworn and evidence begun. The collector told of the finding of the body. Dr Hudson described the nature of the wound. There was no formality. Everyone asked what questions they chose, and swore what they chose, regardless of the laws of evidence.

Dr Hudson believed that death was from fracture of the skull, with several hard medical names superadded. The wound, he swore, was caused by a powerful blow from some heavy object. He laid particular stress on the violence of the blow which had cracked the skull like an egg-shell. Death must have been absolutely instantaneous.

Jennings the butler told again the story he had told Mr Beck of the letter and the hastily-determined journey to London.

No one paid much attention. They were waiting for the London detective, who, so the rumour went about, had "got a clue."

As Mr Beck stepped into the witness chair, the two policemen at the door straightened themselves up as for a superior officer. Mr Malwood at the far side of the room, and the girl close beside, both turned

their faces in his direction. The reporter from London sharpened a pencil at both ends.

The beginning of Mr Beck's evidence was merely formal. Curiosity grew sharper as he recounted his search on the railway line. He told how he had found the scraps of torn paper. The squirt and the paper-weight were produced in turn.

"The dead man's watch," he explained, "told me, not merely the time the murder had been committed, but the place. As the train passed the same place at the same second next day I got out and found—well, what I expected to find."

"Those scraps of paper, Mr Beck?" said the coroner, curiously. "I suppose you kept them—had they any special bearing on the case?"

"Certainly, sir," said Mr Beck. "They were the torn pieces of the very letter which brought the squire on his fatal journey. I have brought the writer of the letter with me from London."

Instantly all eyes were turned, with a half-frightened curiosity on the girl's face. Was this the clue? Was she the murderess?

"Shall I read the letter, sir?" asked Mr Beck.

"If you can."

"Oh! I have put the pieces together as good as new. I will hand it up to the jury when I have read it. The letter is in a lady's writing, very clear and not long.

"'SIR'—it begins—'You must forgive me for writing. Your son does not know. He is very ill; I fear, dying. For a while he got odd work to do for the papers, and we lived somehow. Three weeks

ago he fell sick, and since then we have begun to starve. What little we saved has gone for his food and medicine. My son and myself have no food. If you have a heart at all come up at once and save your only son. You cast him off because he married me in spite of you. We were fools enough to think we could live our own lives. Well, I confess I'm beaten. I give him back to you. You have conquered; you can afford to have pity. I will go away for ever. I can earn my own living as a governess as I did before I met and loved your son. I will swear never to see my husband or boy again if you will only save them. You need not fear to meet me. I will leave the house as you enter it. Only for God's sake come at once, or it will be too late.—Yours faithfully, ANNIE MALWOOD.'

"I called at the address, sir," Mr Beck went on in an even voice, while the jury examined the letter, "and I made arrangements for the comfort of young Mr Malwood, who is so much better that I was able to induce his wife to accompany me here.

"I also called on the family solicitor while in London and learnt that the squire had disinherited his son by a will made shortly after his son's marriage. The squire left everything he died possessed of to his nephew, Mr Malwood."

"All this is very interesting, Mr Beck," said the coroner a little pompously, "but it hardly bears on the purport of our inquiry."

"You will forgive me, sir, but I think it does," rejoined Mr Beck, meekly.

"Oh, I beg your pardon; then you have formed some theory of the manner of this most mysterious murder?"

"Certainly, sir. It is exceedingly simple. The murderer squirted asafœtida into the carriage where the squire was seated. The stench compelled the old man to keep his head out of the window. The murderer from the next carriage struck him with this heavy paper-weight—a terrible missile. With the rush of the air, over sixty miles an hour, added to the force of the throw, it crushed the skull like a hazel nut. The old man tumbled back into the carriage where the porter found him. The weight fell beside the line where I found it."

The coroner and jury gazed at Mr Beck—in open-eyed, open-mouthed amazement. The sudden and simple explanation of the mystery took their breath away.

Even the impassive Mr Malwood was affected. He uttered a sharp cry of surprise, and half rose from his seat. Then he dropped back heavily into his chair, which in the dead silence creaked uneasily under his weight. All felt there was something more coming. The hot air of the crowded room seemed to quiver with excitement. A big bumble-bee blundered in through the open window, droned in great circles round the room, and blundered out before the coroner spoke again.

Mr Beck waited, as placid as ever. But the coroner stammered and gasped, and his voice was dry and husky with excitement. His question was wholly illegal.

"Have you formed any idea, Mr Beck, who the murderer is?"

"There is no room for doubt," said the detective, speaking very slowly, his eyes fixed on Mr Albert Malwood, who sat with his head bowed between his shoulders.

"The murderer is the man whose interest it was to stop at any cost the squire's reconciliation with his only son; the man who took the letter, the squirt and the paper-weight from here; who travelled in front of the squire's carriage, who—"

Crash!!!

Albert Malwood suddenly faced round on his accuser, a revolver in his hand. Before the flash left the barrel Mr Beck dropped from his chair, and the bullet smashed into a mirror behind him.

The murderer fired no second shot. With pistol levelled, the smoke oozing softly from the barrel, he made for the door. The crowd gave way before him; the police, cowed by that pale, fierce face and levelled weapon, moved aside. In a moment he was through; then they jumped after in pursuit. But Mr Beck was before them. He was at the murderer's heel, through the corridor, and across the broad hall. The front door stood open. But Malwood tripped as he crossed the threshold, and, with the momentum of his great speed, shot out head foremost. With a crash his skull struck the sharp angle of the lowest step. He rolled over on the gravel like a shot rabbit; a quiver shook him from head to foot, and he lay, his face to the sky, quite still. His skull when it had struck the stone was

beaten in as you would beat in an egg-shell with a spoon.

Mr Beck was beside him in an instant.

"It's all over," the detective said to the two constables who came up panting, "Sergeant Death has arrested him."

XI

HIS HAND AND SEAL

"MURDER!" The shrill shriek rang out through the still night air, striking sharp on the startled ears of the two men in the lamp-lit streets of the town of Deemington, a quarter of a mile away.

Silence, dead silence followed.

The two constables passing their nightly round through the more lonely streets of the town were brought to a sudden stand by the first wild cry.

"Hark!" cried the elder of the two, "that means mischief, Roper, or I'm a Dutchman."

"It came from away down by Thornton Park," replied the other, anxiously. "If I am not mistaken, sergeant, that was Squire Melville's voice."

"Come along!" cried Sergeant Dempsey, laconically, and the two men went clattering over the pavement and out into the open country on the western side of the town.

One minute's quick run brought them to a fine wrought-iron gate, whose intricate traceries looked like black lace in the moonlight. They entered softly through the little side door which they found ajar, and paused, panting from their run, on the broad avenue just inside.

"Left or right?" whispered the younger man.

"Left," responded Sergeant Dempsey, in the same cautious tone. "I think I hear a sound of moaning down there to the left."

They started off again along a gravelled walk, a white and black patchwork of moonlight and shadow. It was known as the Wild Hyacinth Walk, and the faint, sweet odour of the wild flowers was heavy on the calm night air.

It was no moaning, but only the placid hum of a little stream the sergeant had heard. Its soft sound made the peaceful night more peaceful. Here surely was no scene of wild outrage. The calm beauty of the scene unconsciously impressed the men by its contrast with their own horrible imaginings.

The same thought was in both their minds, though they might have found it hard to put their feelings into words.

They walked more slowly. They were on the point of stopping when a sudden turn showed them a tall figure, clear outlined against the white night, standing stock-still in the very centre of the pathway, not fifty yards in front. Quickening their steps but walking softly on the grass border of the gravel path, they came upon him silently and suddenly.

He never moved. Still as a statue he gazed with pale face and wild eyes at the ghastly object that lay right at his feet.

Yes. Murder had been done in that peaceful place. There lay the young and handsome Squire Melville of Thornton Park, prone on his back. One glance was enough for the practised eyes of the keen officers of the law. The man was dead.

There had been no struggle, the strong man had had no chance for his life. Yet the squire's dark, fierce face had a look of sullen anger, frozen on it by sudden death. He must have looked his murderer full in the face for a single moment just as the blow was struck, and uttered that one shrill, despairing cry as the knife struck. The man was in evening dress. From the wound over his heart the blood, black in the moonlight, oozed slowly, and trickled in a thin line down the glazed white surface of the shirt-front. To the right of the wound were five curious, dark stains, the largest of the five standing clear of the rest.

The living man, motionless as the dead, was gazing intently at the face of the corpse with face as ghastly as its own.

For the moment the constables failed to recognise him, so changed and strange he looked.

Then Sergeant Dempsey cried out: "It's Dr Kerwan! My God! Dr Kerwan, what's the meaning of this?"

The man addressed seemed to waken like one half dazed by an ugly dream. "I don't know," he stammered, "murder it would seem. I heard a cry and I ran to it. I saw a man disappear in the distance, I found this here. There is no hope," he added incoherently, "he is quite dead."

"How did you come here, sir, at this hour of the night?" said Sergeant Dempsey, sharply, but respectfully withal.

"I cannot tell you," said the doctor. He had got back something of his composure, and spoke, as was his wont, very quietly, though the handsome face

still looked ghastly, and the strong figure quivered with suppressed excitement.

The constables interchanged glances of quick suspicion. The doctor was well and favourably known to both of them, not merely as a skilful physician, but as one of the pleasantest-mannered and kindliest-hearted of men. But constables are constables, and, to use their own phrase, the case looked very black against Dr Kerwan. His feud with the dead man and the cause of it were the common gossip of Deemington.

"Then, Dr Kerwan," said the sergeant, speaking with a gravity that gave him a sort of dignity, "I fear it is my duty to arrest you on suspicion of the wilful murder of Squire Stanley Melville. You are not bound to say anything, but I have to warn you that anything you do say may be used in evidence against you."

The very notion of such a thing plainly struck the doctor then for the first time with sharp surprise. There was anger in his voice as he turned upon the sergeant.

"This is too absurd, Dempsey. Do you really think I killed the man?"

"I must do my duty, sir," said the sergeant, stolidly, but not without a certain respect, "you are on the spot at the time of the murder. You can give no account of why or how you came here. The town knows that you and the squire were not good friends. All this is for the magistrates, not for the like of me. You'll excuse me, sir, but I must take you to the police-station."

His right hand went into the breast of his tunic as

he spoke, but his comrade whispered a remonstrance. He, too, was a constable, but he was human. Dr Kerwan had saved his sister's life the week before.

"Never mind the handcuffs, Dempsey," he whispered.

"Never mind the handcuffs, Dempsey," echoed the doctor, whose quick ear had caught the whisper, "I am quite willing to go whenever you choose to take me."

A curious change had come over his face and voice. With a sharp chill of returning consciousness he seemed to realise for the first time his position. In a flash he realised the deadly pressure of the evidence against him, the horrible peril in which he stood, the imprisonment, the trial, the shameful death that might follow. No wonder a sickening feeling stole shudderingly through his body. But he faced the situation with the courage of conscious innocence, or the despair of cunning guilt.

"If you are ready, sergeant, I am," he said. There was no tremor in his voice, there was no faltering in his step as he strode beside his captor down the peaceful moonlit path, where the flowers filled the air with perfume, and the running stream with dreamy sound. The other constable kept lonely vigil the while beside the murdered master of that pleasant place.

. . . . . .

Paul Beck was enjoying his early breakfast in his own snug fashion in his own snug chambers in the very pleasantest quarter of Deemington, when he was startled by a quick, impatient knock at the

sitting-room door. Before he could say "Come in," Frank Wolfington burst into the room, crying out as he entered:

"I'm so glad I've caught you, Mr Beck."

"Why, am I wanted for murder?" replied Paul Beck, jestingly.

Then, as he turned and caught sight of the young man's face, his whole manner changed. It was hard enough to recognise in the excited young fellow who had broken so abruptly into his chambers the genial and jocund Frank Wolfington, the brightest and most popular man in Deemington, who had gallantly lived down the reputation of the driving, grinding, grasping old miser his father.

Frank Wolfington's dashing appearance, his yellow curls, and merry blue eyes, were the envy of the young men and the delight of the young girls at every gay gathering in the town. But no one had ever seen Frank Wolfington in earnest or excited before.

"Don't look at me like that," he cried impetuously to Mr Beck, who continued gazing at him with blank amazement. "You'll be as excited as I am when you hear the news. Stanley Melville was murdered last night, stabbed through the heart in his own grounds."

"You are not serious!"

"Do I look like jesting? Is this a thing to jest about? But bad as it is, there is worse behind; Mark Kerwan—Dr Kerwan, you know, has been arrested for the murder."

"What a stupid blunder! I haven't known the

man long, but I know him well enough to know he could not do a thing like that."

"I hope not. I most sincerely hope not; he was a dear friend of mine. But they have got a pile of evidence against him. He was found on the spot by the police red-handed, as one might say. You know he and Melville didn't pull at all. It was hard to pull with Melville. But there was real bad blood between these men. Then there's one awful piece of evidence. The knife that killed the squire was a black-handled knife, and there is one of the same pattern missing from the case in Kerwan's surgery."

"You don't think yourself he did it?"

"Don't ask me. I cannot believe he did it, I won't believe he did it, a cold-blooded, deliberate murder. There must have been some terrible provocation—Melville was such a proud, violent, insulting chap—you remember he struck me across the face with his riding-whip in the public street, merely for handing his sister to her phaeton. I should love to think there was some terrible provocation in this case. Kerwan himself denies the whole thing, point-blank. But that's not the question now. That's not what I came to talk to you about, Mr Beck. You must get him off. It's his last chance. Miss Melville is distracted, and it's hard to blame her, poor girl. It is rough upon her; her only brother murdered, and her sweetheart in danger of being hanged for it."

"Her sweetheart?" said Mr Beck.

"Don't you know? I thought you knew. Yes! They were engaged to be married. That's what made the doctor and the squire so furious with one an-

other. Melville was his sister's guardian, you know. He was frantic about the engagement, swore she should never marry an Irishman. He treated the girl badly, too, they say, locked her up in her own room, and all that sort of thing. It is an awful business whatever way you look at it, Mr Beck, but we have got to make the best of it. You are the poor fellow's last chance. I don't like talking of fees to you, but you know I'm pretty well off. No expense must be spared. I know you will put by everything else, and throw yourself into this with your whole heart and soul."

"I won't take up the case, I cannot take up the case," said Mr Beck, with quiet determination. "Don't you see why I cannot? You are Kerwan's best friend, and yet you cannot conceal your strong suspicion of his guilt. The facts against him are damning. I know Miss Melville for the nicest girl in Deemington. Do you think I could set my mind to work and by some quibble of the law save a murderer from the gallows and give him for a husband to a nice young girl? The thing is preposterous."

"But every man is to be presumed innocent until he is proved guilty; isn't that what the lawyers say?"

"Rot!" broke in Mr Beck, impatiently. "I am not going to stifle my conscience with legal jargon. I couldn't if I tried. I would help to hang the man if I did anything, and I don't want to do that."

In vain Wolfington attempted to shake his resolve, and after a full half-hour's unavailing remonstrance and entreaty he departed disconsolate to see what could be done elsewhere.

Mr Beck made no pretence of resuming his breakfast. He flung himself into an easy chair, his brain in a perfect whirl. But through the horror and confusion of his thoughts there kept constantly rising to the surface the vague suggestion: "What if Dr Kerwan is innocent after all?"

It was a positive relief to him when a second knock came to his chamber door, low and timid this time.

"Come in," he cried, glancing round, without rising from his seat. But the next moment he was on his feet, staring with open-eyed amazement.

The doorway framed a girl's figure, as winsome as ever man's eyes looked upon. The young face was very pale, the sweet, red lips close shut, yet quivering, and the blue eyes bright with piteous entreaty.

"Miss Melville!" was all he could stammer out.

"Yes, I have come myself," she said, answering his looks not his words, "I know you will not refuse me."

He shook his head sorrowfully. "I cannot," he murmured, "indeed I cannot. Did not Mr Wolfington tell you?"

"He did. He told me there was no use in my coming, that you were as firm as a rock and as cold. But I knew better. I know you will not let my affianced husband perish miserably without stretching a hand to save him. I have had sorrow enough. I feel as if I were going mad with the horror of it. He is innocent, oh, believe me he is innocent," she cried with plaintive persistence. "His heart is mine, and I know it as I know my own. I could as

soon have done this horrible thing myself as he. Will you not save him for me? "

" But Mr Wolfington? " began Mr Beck.

" I have never loved him," the girl cried.

" Love? " said Mr Beck, briskly, with a curious inflection in his voice, " was Wolfington in love with you? "

" Oh, I should not have spoken of that, but he has forgiven me, he has promised to help me. Oh, do not desert me! "

She flung herself on the floor at his knees, sobbing as if her heart would break.

But he raised her very gently and gravely, as an elder brother might, and helped her to a seat.

" There is no need of that, Miss Melville," he said slowly, " I will do as you desire. Such help as I can give is freely yours, and his. I feel he is innocent. I feel it as strongly as you do yourself. Your love for him is the only warranty I desire. You could not love a man capable of so base a crime. That is assurance enough for me. Another thought has struck me, but it is as yet too vague to talk about. Do not be too hopeful. The case looks very black against your lover. But of this be sure, every power and faculty of my mind will be strained to the one object of saving him. I promise it."

Poor child, she could find no words to thank him. But the grateful look in her soft eyes, and the timid pressure of the little hot hand as he helped her to her carriage were thanks enough, and he felt a kind of envy for the miserable man who lay in prison with the horrible charge hanging over his head.

The coroner's inquest was next day. Mr Beck

formally instructed a clever young solicitor of the town. But he took the whole heat and burden of the case upon himself. He went early in company with the solicitor for the prosecution to examine the body. The knife, he was told, was found clumsily hidden close to the scene of the murder, heft and hilt were clotted with blood. Mr Beck seemed much struck with the five bloodstains on the bosom of the shirt, which he examined closely through a powerful magnifying-glass.

" You will have those photographed, of course, Mr Lestrange," he said to the Crown solicitor, " they may prove useful in elucidating the mystery."

" There does not seem much of a mystery, Mr Beck," replied the other, smiling blandly. " I'm sorry for the wretched man's sake. I had a high opinion of him myself."

" But you will do as I suggest? "

" Certainly, certainly, I had already intended it." But he hadn't. Beck's suggestion first put the notion in his mind.

It was Beck, too, who first pointed to the fact that the edges of the dead man's waistcoat pockets, and of the light dust-coat he wore, were smeared with blood, as if ransacked with blood-stained fingers. But as his purse and watch were in their place this curious circumstance seemed to lead nowhere.

It is true there had been no trace of blood on Kerwan's hands when he was arrested. But the prosecution was not without its explanation. Faint marks of footsteps had been found leading from the gravel walk where the body was found, down to the

brink of the little brook and back again. The marks were indeed too faint to enable the footprints to be identified, but it was quite plain to the official mind that the prisoner had gone down to the brook to wash the red evidence of guilt from his fingers. Why he had afterwards returned to stand over his victim till the police came was, however, a problem which the official mind was not so ready to explain.

It was strange how much Mr Beck seemed perturbed by this little bit of evidence. The official explanation plainly did not satisfy his mind. When the group of spectators and speculators had moved away, he walked down along the line of footprints and stood on the grassy margin of the small stream peering into its brown, running waters, as if he hoped they would give up their secret to his earnest scrutiny.

Then he moved slowly down-stream close to the bank, with restless eyes glancing everywhere. A few hundred yards lower he came to a little miniature whirlpool made by a large grey stone in the centre of the current. The swirling water of this little eddy caught all light things that came floating down the stream, and backed them into a patch of smooth water at the side fringed round with weeds.

This was on the other side of the stream, which was here some sixteen feet across. With an activity none would have expected from his build, Mr Beck backed a score of paces on the firm sward, and cleared the brook from bank to bank at a bound. The next moment he was eagerly peering and poking with his walking cane into the accumulated rubbish. There were all sorts of dank flotsam and jetsam there;

a child's boat turned mast downwards, a couple of straw champagne cases from some picnic party upstream, and half a dozen corks, were one after the other raked ashore.

But his interest seemed mainly excited by a number of little, tiny scraps of white paper, torn as small as the " scent " for a boys' paper chase. With infinite care and patience he secured every morsel. He wiped the fragments lightly with his handkerchief and set them in the hot sunshine to dry.

There was writing on the paper, made fainter indeed by the water, but still plainly legible. Beck scanned the writing with intense eagerness, piecing the fragments roughly together, so as to get a word or two in sequence here and there. His keen grey eyes brightened as he looked. A smile struggled at the corners of his firm mouth. " I thought so," he muttered, " I thought so."

Then, packing the scraps carefully in the pocket of his notebook, he cleared the stream once more in a flying leap, and walked briskly back to the town, in good time for the inquest.

The constables told their story with dull, damning accuracy of detail. The bad feeling between the murdered man and the accused, and the incidents of the finding of the knife and body and the prisoner, were all in turn deposed to.

Then came an unexpected witness. Miss Lilian Melville insisted on being examined. There was what the reporters call " a sensation " in the court, as the graceful figure stepped up to the table, and raising her veil showed a face as pale as death and as sad.

A low murmur ran through the crowd. They had

made up their minds about Dr Kerwan's guilt, as people are always ready to believe the worst. His character for kindness and gentleness did not help him in the least; on the contrary, it seemed to heighten the revulsion of feeling against him. There was a bitter indignation in Court that an only sister should come to offer evidence on behalf of her brother's murderer.

All eyes were fixed cruelly on her sweet face, as she took the book. She flushed and trembled under the brutal ordeal, but her low voice was clear and steady, and could be heard at the furthest end of the silent court.

"What do you know about this terrible occurrence, Miss Melville?"

"I know what brought Dr Kerwan to the place that night, and I must tell if he will not." Her voice faltered for a moment, then she went on in the same clear whisper. "He came in answer to a note from me. He is my affianced husband. But my brother was bitterly opposed to our marriage. Dr Kerwan asked me and I agreed to meet him there at ten o'clock, and I left the small gate open for him to come through. I waited for him for about twenty minutes. Then I knew he could not come, for he had always been before time. I had just gone back to the house and was in my own room when I heard the awful cry. A little while afterwards there came a loud knocking at the door. I went down to see what it meant, and I found—" She broke down all of a sudden, her eyes filled up, her lips quivered, and, with one quick glance at the prisoner, she covered her face with her hands and wept silently.

The Crown solicitor waited for a few moments with old-fashioned courtesy. "Will you pardon me a question or two, Miss Melville?" he said at last very gently. "You arranged to meet Dr Kerwan at ten o'clock, you waited twenty minutes; he did not appear. Shortly after you heard the death-cry of your murdered brother?"

She saw the trap into which she had fallen.

"Yes," she answered, so faintly the words were scarcely audible, "that is so."

There was yet another surprise for the court when Dr Kerwan himself stepped into the witness-chair, calm and collected as if he was in his own surgery. It was hard to look on that handsome face, with the broad brow and frank, fearless eyes, and think the man a murderer. "But appearances are deceptive," said one man in the crowd to his neighbour.

Curiously enough Mr Beck made no objection to his being examined. "When I believe a man is innocent," he said, "I let him fire away; he cannot hurt himself. I want all the facts brought out in this case. All."

Very briefly Dr Kerwan confirmed the evidence of Miss Melville. He had gone there to meet her by appointment. He had heard the cry of murder, came suddenly upon the dead body lying in the centre of the pathway, and had been stunned by the sight. It was at that moment the police arrived.

"You were more than half an hour late for your appointment, Dr Kerwan," said Mr Lestrange. "How was that?"

"I cannot account for it. I started from home at half-past nine, and I can walk to the place in a

little over twenty minutes. I went straight there without stopping. Perhaps Miss Melville's watch was fast."

"She is confirmed as to the time by the constables. They found the body at half-past ten, and, according to your own story, you had only that moment arrived. Is your own watch a good timekeeper?"

"Most accurate. It never loses or gains a minute. It is a curious, old-fashioned, family watch, with a modern lever movement inserted. The watchmaker told me they make no such works in modern watches. It has been going for a hundred years, and should go for a hundred more."

"Have you it here?"

"I have, but it is run down. I forgot to wind it last night."

"That is unfortunate. Was there anybody with you in your rooms before you started last evening?"

"Yes, Mr Wolfington dined with me. We dined early. I told him I had to keep an important appointment at ten o'clock. He laughed, I remember, and chaffed me about it. He asked me was it a case of heart disease. I told him the hour—I did not tell him what the appointment was, but I think he guessed. He knew of my engagement to Miss Melville."

"He went away before you?"

"Yes, he left about seven or half-past seven."

"Mr Wolfington is a particular friend of yours?"

"A very dear friend. Our friendship began with a long attendance, in which I had the good fortune to pull him through a bad attack of typhoid."

One of the jurors asked that Mr Wolfington might

be examined, but he had very little to say. There was a manifest eagerness to make his evidence tell as far as possible in Dr Kerwan's favour. He remembered dining with Dr Kerwan. He had suspected where he was going that evening, but did not know for certain.

"Did Dr Kerwan seem at all nervous or excited?" asked Mr Lestrange.

"Not in the least."

"Pray remember yourself, sir. According to his own story he was going to meet his betrothed. Did he seem at all excited?"

"Oh, yes, now I remember, he was terribly excited. He hardly touched his dinner. He could not sit quiet in his chair."

"You left before he did?"

"Yes, but I think it only fair to say that Dr Kerwan was quite accurate in his evidence about his watch. I know it well. Only that very day he was showing it to me, and telling me what a perfect timekeeper it was. He took off the outer case to show it to me. He said it was over a hundred years old, and was as good as when it started."

"Do you remember was it correct when you looked at it?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"Had you it in your hands?"

"I had."

"The owner was boasting of its accuracy? Would you not have noticed if it were wrong then?"

"I'm sure I would. I'm sure it was quite correct."

The prisoner's solicitor, prompted by Mr Beck,

asked only one question, and that seemed quite wide of the case. "Squire Melville," he said, "was a violent-tempered man to your own knowledge?"

"Yes," replied the witness, eager apparently to help his friend in any way. "He once struck me across the face without any provocation."

That closed the inquiry. The jury, after a very brief deliberation indeed, found that Squire Stanley Melville had been wilfully murdered by Dr Mark Kerwan.

There was much disappointment at the "form" displayed by Kerwan's solicitor. He was noted alike for his getting a strong hold on a jury, and his pulverising powers as a cross-examiner. He had displayed neither faculty. He had been apathetic, they said, almost inattentive, and certainly had scarcely opened his mouth during the inquiry. His chance had come and he had not taken it. It was true the case was a hopeless one, but that was no excuse for letting it drop.

"For that very reason," said a sporting solicitor to a group of admirers, "Charley ought to have had his fling out of it. He should have blazed away right and left at everything that got up, and he might have winged a witness with a stray grain at a snap-shot. As it is, he has not knocked a feather out of one of them. The last question of his was pure bosh. Did he want to make out that Kerwan was right in stabbing the squire because he had a bad temper?"

But Mr Beck seemed in no way disconcerted with the case or the comment. He even smiled a little as the verdict was read.

Lilian, who knew the man as only women know men, took courage from his smile. Her shy look of gratitude went straight to his heart. His answer was like the man he was. He walked straight to where Dr Kerwan stood with a constable guarding him on either side, and, in full view of the hostile crowd, shook his hand warmly like a friend.

"Keep a good heart, doctor," he said, "I know you are innocent, and I believe we can pull you through yet."

The man in deadly peril looking on that calm, resolute face read hope of life and happiness.

The magistrate's investigation was little more than a duplicate of the inquest. Dr Kerwan was formally committed for trial at the ensuing Assizes. One curious little incident might have been noticed by a particularly sharp pair of eyes. A different Bible was presented to Wolfington, when he came to be sworn, from that given to the other witnesses, and it quickly and quietly disappeared when his oath was taken. As the two books were identical in appearance, with the same smooth, black, shiny covers, it was hard to notice the change. But Mr Beck's lips twitched at the corners with the faint inception of a smile when he saw the trick performed.

There happened to be little doing at the time, and the newspapers of the three kingdoms made the most of the sensational murder. The whole country seethed in wild excitement over it, and Deemington was of course the centre of the vortex. The Attorney-General came down himself to prosecute, and stayed in the town for a week before the Assizes.

He was much annoyed when he learnt that Mr

Beck was working up evidence for the defence, and sent at once for that imperturbable gentleman.

The Attorney-General was a bright-eyed, brisk little man, rapid of speech and movement. The contrast between himself and Mr Beck as they stood together in the best sitting-room of the best hotel of the town was the contrast between a sparrow-hawk and an owl.

"I have heard of you, Mr Beck, very favourably," the Attorney-General began with gracious condescension; "you are well spoken of, Mr Beck, in the highest of quarters, the very highest of quarters. When I learnt you happened to be staying at Deemington, I was anxious to secure your services in this case for the Crown."

"You shall have them, sir," said Mr Beck.

The Attorney-General seemed surprised.

"Then I was mistaken."

"In your view of the case, very likely, Attorney-General."

"No, no"—a little snappishly, "I was mistaken in supposing you were interested for the defence."

"Oh, you are not mistaken in that."

"I'm sorry to hear it. I should have hoped that your sympathies would have been on the side of the law. I suppose I may not ask you if you have discovered any evidence bearing on the case."

"Indeed you may, and I will answer you quite frankly. I must tell you first I have only agreed to help the accused so long as I believed him to be innocent, not a moment longer. That undertaking does not hinder me from bringing a guilty man to justice."

"I'm delighted to hear it. Then I am to understand you have discovered some new and material evidence?"

"Some new and conclusive evidence," corrected Mr Beck.

"It can hardly be more conclusive than the evidence we already possess," said the Attorney-General with an incredulous smile.

"It is far more conclusive."

"Well, well, we won't quarrel about that anyway, we cannot have our case too strong. Will you kindly make out a short outline of your evidence, Mr Beck, and have it sent to the Crown solicitor?"

"No," said Mr Beck, shortly, "I won't." The Attorney-General started. "I will give you my evidence, which I repeat is conclusive, on one condition only, that I am allowed to give it at a consultation at which the counsel and the witnesses for the prosecution are present."

"But this is most irregular."

"I cannot help that."

"Mr Beck," said the Attorney-General, curtly, "I'll be quite frank with you. If I were to act on my own judgment I would instantly refuse your condition. I cannot believe that you have discovered any material evidence not already in the possession of the Crown. I am sure that the evidence we have already against the accused is, as it stands, quite sufficient to secure his conviction."

"I am quite sure it is," said Mr Beck.

"Then, in the name of common sense, what do we want with yours?"

"To make surety double sure. In a murder

case there should be no room, not the space of a pin's point, for doubt."

"Quite so, quite so," assented the Attorney-General, "and you think the evidence vital?"

"I'm sure of it."

"You are very confident. Let me say again frankly your confidence does not convince me. But you have strong backers, Mr Beck. The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister himself have spoken very highly of you. I accept your conditions."

So it came about that three days before the trial there was an informal Crown consultation. All the witnesses examined at the inquest were present, together with the counsel and solicitor for the Crown. Even Lilian Melville was there. A thick, black veil hid her face, but in the pose of her head, in every movement and gesture, there was a suggestion of impatience.

As she entered, young Wolfington sought her side with softly-uttered sympathy, but she managed to elude him, and kept as close as possible to Mr Beck, who for his part kept close to the door.

"Won't you sit down, Mr Beck?" said the Attorney-General, with dangerous courtesy—the courtesy of the cushioned paws of the cat with the nails close to the surface.

"Thanks. I can say what I have got to say standing," replied Mr Beck, mildly.

"Then perhaps you will be kind enough to say what you have to say—if you have anything worth saying," retorted the Attorney-General. The last

few words were in an aside to a colleague, but loud enough for Mr Beck to hear.

"Well, the first thing I have to say," he began bluntly, "is that you have got hold of the wrong man."

A quiver of surprise ran through his audience. Lilian Melville turned her veiled face sharply towards Mr Beck. One could see she was looking and listening intently. Young Wolfington, sitting by himself at the far end of the room, grew rigid with excitement at the words. The Attorney-General laughed jarringly. "Indeed! sir, and will you give us the right one?"

"In good time."

"You have witnesses, I presume, to the truth of this singular statement, Mr Beck. You will perhaps offer us an *alibi*"—and he laughed again contemptuously.

"I have no witnesses, only a few photos," said Mr Beck.

"How interesting! You mean, I presume, to produce them on behalf of the prisoner at his trial?"

"No, for the sufficient reason that the prisoner you hold will never be tried."

"And why not, if I may inquire?"

"Because in half an hour you will yourself order his release."

Then the Attorney-General, dropping his bantering tone, lapsed into sudden anger.

"Let us have an end of this nonsense, sir," he cried sharply. "If you have really anything to the purpose, tell it. But remember I need proofs."

"You shall have them. Bear with me for just one

minute. I want to begin at the beginning. It was Mr Frank Wolfington's visit that first put me on the right track. For that service, at least, the prisoner has to thank him."

Mr Wolfington stood up as if to speak, but sat down without a word.

"Mr Wolfington gave me my first clue," went on Mr Beck, smoothly, "then I blundered on from one thing to another through the dark passage till I came out into the light at the far end.

"I need not remind you, sir," he said, addressing the Attorney-General, and emphasising his points with a thick forefinger on a broad palm, "I need not remind you of the blood marks on the pockets of the murdered man. They were a little hard to explain as there was nothing stolen, and there was no blood on the hands of Dr Kerwan which were supposed to have made those marks.

"Of course the Crown had a theory—the Crown always has a theory." He said this quite seriously, not in the least as if he were laughing at the Crown. "Dr Kerwan, it was surmised, had gone down to the little stream to wash the blood off his hands; there were the footmarks down and back to prove it. But that didn't quite explain why Dr Kerwan should come back to stand beside the man he murdered.

"I didn't like the Crown's answer to the riddle. I tried one of my own. The real murderer—the chap with the bloody fingers—knew of some clue in the squire's pockets. He wanted that, though he didn't want purse or money. He went down to the stream to throw it in. If by any chance it happened to be paper—a letter for example—it

would float. My guess chanced to come right. Here is a letter I got out of the water. It was torn into little bits when I got it, but I have patched it together."

He handed the letter to the Attorney-General—a letter pasted on a dark sheet of paper, with scores of faint, zigzag marks, like the lines on a child's puzzle map, showing the piecing together of the fragments, and the Attorney-General read it aloud:

"If you would find your sister and the Irish doctor in company, try the Wild Hyacinth Walk at half-past ten this evening. I don't ask you to take anything on trust. Seeing is believing.—Yours, A FAITHFUL FRIEND."

"The handwriting is disguised," went on Mr Beck, placidly, "but I think, if need be, I can prove who wrote it. That letter brought Squire Melville to his death."

"But," began the Attorney-General.

"One moment," said Mr Beck, "there are a lot of 'buts' in the case; there is an answer to them all.

"What, you may ask, kept Dr Kerwan late for his appointment? How did his watch go wrong—how was his surgical knife found near the place all covered with the squire's blood? Let me ask a few questions in reply. Who was in Dr Kerwan's rooms that day? Who knew of his appointment? Who had his watch in his hand and could put it back or forward as he pleased? Who had the chance of stealing the knife out of the surgery? Finally, who was likely to take the chance at one stroke to revenge himself on the man he had reason to hate

and to clear a favoured rival for ever out of his way? "

Excitement and suspense were growing in the room, but Mr Beck's insistent voice gave no time for expression.

" It is easy to guess, but we need no guessing," he continued implacably, " when we have clear proof.

" You remember the five blood marks on the shirt-front of the murdered man? "

The Attorney-General nodded.

" I never had a doubt," said Mr Beck, " the murderer pressed his blood-stained finger and thumb tips on the breast of his victim as he drew out the knife which was wedged in the wound. That was his signature to his work—his hand and seal on the deed. I need not tell you, sir, that there can be no more infallible test of a man's identity. It is the test used, as you know, in every prison in Europe. Well, at my request, the solicitor for the Crown had a magnified photo made of those marks, and here it is."

He showed as he spoke a huge photo of five great spots on a white ground. Each spot was traversed with a thousand fine lines like a skeleton leaf, or a close-woven cobweb.

" I wanted the murderer's finger and thumb marks for comparison and I got them. A Bible was prepared for his sole use at the inquest. A thin coating of wax was on the cover, and took the impression of his thumb and finger tips. Of this impression, too, I had a magnified photo made to compare with the other. In every line and curve it

is identical. There is no escape from the conclusion. The hand that held that Bible was the hand that grasped the knife. The Sacred Book bears witness against the murderer."

Mr Beck never raised his voice, but there was that in his level tone that held his audience fast.

When he paused the silence was intense.

It was broken suddenly by a quick, short snap, like the report of a Christmas cracker. But there was death in that puny sound.

A puff of smoke rose in a corner of the room, and the hot smell of gunpowder stole into the air.

There was a rush to pick up the limp, lifeless figure; that was all that was left of the gay, debonair Frank Wolfington. His right hand still grasped a pretty toy pistol—a charming, ivory-inlaid, gold-mounted plaything, only a few inches in length—a dainty trifle, brilliant as a gaily-coloured snake of the tropics, and as deadly. They found a little, jagged, red hole in the white forehead—" not as deep as a well nor as wide as a church door," but it served. Frank Wolfington had anticipated the hangman.

Turning his back on the dead man and the crowd that buzzed about him, the Attorney-General gripped Mr Beck's hand hard. He was manifestly much shaken. " I thank you," he said in a low voice. " But for you I would have prosecuted an innocent man to the death. You will come with me at once."

" Where? " asked Mr Beck.

" Straight to the prison, of course, with an order

for the prisoner's release. He must not suffer a moment that can be spared him."

"Attorney-General," said Mr Beck, gravely, "there is one here who has first claim. It is to the loyalty of Miss Melville that her affianced husband owes his escape from a shameful death."

The Attorney-General turned, eager as a boy, to the girl whose veil was thrown aside, whose cheeks were flushed and lips bright with the joy of a great deliverance.

"You will come with us, dear lady," he said. "You will be the first to tell him the good news with your own lips. It is a privilege you have earned."

XII

QUICK WORK

THEY were a pleasant party at Alwood—Lord Marchal's big and beautiful country-seat, twenty miles from anywhere at all, in the heart of the wild country. Reversing the customary precedents, his lordship's daughter Winifred—more popularly known as Lady Madcap—was to marry Roland Parker, one of the very youngest and best-looking of America's multi-millionaires. The wedding presents had come pouring in in an ever-increasing torrent for a month or more, and one large room at Alwood glittered like a Bond Street shop with a vast array of silver and gold and flashing jewels, for winsome Lady Madcap was the most popular girl in the countryside.

Only the day before, Roland Parker had come over in his new toy—a eighty horse-power Mércedes, which he drove with erratic recklessness, and his coming naturally gave fresh stimulus to the gaieties at Alwood.

They kept it up late that night, the young folk in the ball-room, and their elders at the bridge-tables, and the darkness was melting into the summer dawn before the great house had settled to repose.

All of a sudden a startled cry, then the sharp crack of a pistol-shot rang through the silence of the still dawn. Instantly the whole household was awake and buzzing like a beehive with excitement. As by magic the great stairs and corridors were thronged with a babbling and disorderly crowd. The women in dressing-gowns, the men in pyjamas, bare-footed and bareheaded, streamed with one accord towards the room where the wedding-presents were housed.

Alert and strenuous young Roland Parker headed the throng. Within a minute after the shot was heard his hand was on the door knob. The handle turned, but the door refused to open. He stepped back a pace or two into the thick of the following crowd, his shoulder came against the door with a crash like a battering ram, the fastening gave, and he plunged headlong into darkness. Rebounding from the floor like a rubber ball, he was on his feet in a moment.

A breath of the cold night air struck across his face, and from the farther end of the room came a low moaning. Groping with stretched fingers, Roland found the switch of the electric light. The dazzling glare of a score of lamps flashed out at once, as the crowd—wild-eyed with excitement—came pouring into the room.

There all was confusion, tables overthrown and their contents scattered on the ground. In a corner, huddled in a shapeless heap, moaning, bleeding, and blubbering, lay the footman who had been left on guard during the night. The table in front of him was overturned, his revolver lay on the floor, and

beside it a broken champagne bottle, the liquor foaming white over the carpet.

Roland had seen service in the Spanish-American war. A single glance showed him the footman was more frightened than hurt. The fellow told his story in short gasps. He could not deny that he had had a little champagne to drink his young lady's health; then he must have dropped off in a doze, from which he woke suddenly to see a man with a black bag moving silently from table to table.

In his surprise the footman leapt to his feet and cried out. Thereupon the burglar, without an instant's hesitation, turned and fired his revolver.

"My leg felt as if you had put hot iron to it," the man wailed. "I caught the table and it came over with me. Then the lights went out, and a moment afterwards the door burst open."

One look was quite enough to tell Roland how the burglar had entered and escaped. The window stood open, and under it was a chair. Breaking through, the burglar had shivered the glass, which lay in a glittering litter on the carpet.

"We have him!" cried Lord Marchal, exultantly. "He cannot escape. The window opens on to the garden, and the garden on to the coachyard. The gates are locked, the walls of the coachyard are too high to climb without a ladder, and the ladders are all locked up at night. The fellow is caught in a trap."

Meanwhile poor Lady Madcap darted from table to table with little shrill cries of dismay. "Oh, oh!" she wailed, "the brute has taken all my nicest things, nothing but jewels or gold."

"Egad!" commented Lord Marchal, "that black bag of his is worth carrying."

"And it will be hard to carry. Gold weighs heavy, sir," interposed Roland, who seemed instinctively to take command of the situation. Already he had tied up the footman's wound with a handkerchief, and had him carried off to bed. Now he turned to the crowd of half-dressed men who waited impatiently for instructions; the ladies in *deshabille* had melted away from the glare of the electric light, as snow melts before the sunshine.

"You fellows get a move on," cried Roland; "it's up to you to catch this chap. Jump into your things, search the garden and coach-house. I'm off to the police-station."

"It is a long twelve miles," objected Lord Marchal.

"Twenty minutes for the motor," Roland answered cheerily. "I'll be back with the 'cops' within the hour."

As the big car went humming and throbbing round the bend of the avenue in the grey light of the dawn, a girl stepped into the middle of the road and blocked its passage, both hands raised. Roland put the brakes down hard, and the wheels ploughed the gravel.

"Jerusalem! You here, Winnie?"

"Just so." She was beside the car now.

"But, my girl, you cannot come, you know."

"You mean, my boy, you cannot go without me."

"I just can. Why not?"

"You are off to the police-station?"

" That's so."

" You know the way, of course," with fine scorn.

" I can ask the way," stammered Roland, who had missed this important point.

" Ask the trees! ask the stones! You won't meet a soul on the road. Now don't be silly. Move over a little on the seat; I'll show you the way."

Before he could remonstrate she had jumped in beside him, and the great car went humming down the avenue and out through the huge, wrought-iron gates to the high road.

" To the right! " cried Lady Madcap, and nestled comfortably amongst the cushions.

It was her boast that she could dress, and dress well, in seven minutes. " Ten if I dawdle." And now she had justified her boast. The trim blue costume was perfect. Her cheeks were flushed, and her brown eyes alight with excitement. She looked her best, and knew it.

" Straight on," she said, as she jabbed in the hat pins more tightly and drew a thick blue motor veil over her face, " like a cloud over the sun," as Roland observed with a lover's fatuity.

It was a delicious drive, so they confided to one another. The cool freshness of the dawn, faintly sweet with the perfumes of the may-blossoms, was in the air, and the half-awakened birds were chirping in the thick hedgerows. A sharp shower had fallen during the night and laid the white dust under a thin coat of grey mud through which the wheels of the great motor slid noiselessly.

The lovers' hearts were elate as they sped through the growing dawn. Lady Madcap half forgot her lost

trinkets, and Roland thought the drive was cheaply bought at their loss. They sat needlessly close together, though the front seat of the great motor was wide, and Roland had only one hand on the steering wheel as they sped along the straight stretches, or whirled perilously on two wheels round the curves. It was perhaps lucky that the roads were so lonesome.

More and more light it grew, and of a sudden the red rim of the sun blazed over the edge of a distant hill, just as the motor drew up with a jerk at the narrow entrance to the lane that led to the police-station. Both leapt out together, leaving the motor at the roadside.

The lane wound between high hedges white with may-blossom, up the steep slope on which the police-station stood, with rustic porch and creepers, disguised as a rural cottage.

Early as was the hour, the inmates were already astir in the police-station. The sound of voices came down to their ears as they climbed the slope of the lane.

"Yes, Mr Beck," a loud voice cried cheerily, "as good a stream for trout as any in the county or the county next it. Try the deep pool under the crooked elm tree. There's a big trout there, five pounds if it's an ounce. I hooked him last Sunday fortnight, and he snapped my line as if it were sewing cotton. Good-morning and good luck. I wish you the best of sport."

A stout, good-humoured man, fishing-rod in hand and fishing-basket over his shoulder, came briskly past them in the lane, and they had a glimpse

of the sergeant at the porch, half dressed, waving him a cordial good-bye.

The next moment the sergeant caught sight of them in turn, and stared with round, wide-open eyes —a stout statue of surprise.

"Morning, my lady," he stammered. "Is there anything I can do? I did not expect to see— I beg your pardon, miss—" His fingers fumbled hopelessly with his buttons, his tongue left the sentence unfinished.

My Lady Madcap took him up kindly, but briskly. "Sorry to trouble you, sergeant," she said, "but there has been a burglary at Alwood. My presents have all been stolen. We want you and your men to come at once to catch the thief. The motor-car is waiting on the road."

The sergeant was himself in a moment; his eyes lit with more than professional alacrity. His first sudden exclamation startled his visitors as much as their coming had startled him.

"Your ladyship is in luck," he cried. "Here Tom!" he shouted to a lounging, half-clad subordinate, "look alive, will you? Run after Mr Beck, and ask him will he be kind enough to step back here for a moment. Tell him it's something in his line, something very important."

"You'll excuse me, my lady," the sergeant added more soberly to the astonished girl, while Tom set off at a sharp trot after the fisherman, "when I said you were in luck. I didn't mean you were lucky to lose your wedding presents; but you were lucky to light by mere chance on the man who, if any man can, will catch the thief for you. I was in a job

with him myself once—a queer murder case it was —and we all suspected the wrong man before he came. But Mr Beck spelt it out as easy as A B C. He's as clever as they make 'em, my lady."

The constable must have missed his way, for it was a full fifteen minutes before he returned with the burly fisherman in tow. Meanwhile the sergeant had been voluble in the great detective's praises.

"Mr Beck," he broke off abruptly, addressing the stout gentleman who sauntered back good-humouredly, "here is Lady Winifred Marchal, who wants your help in the matter of a burglary. My lady, this is Mr Paul Beck, the cleverest detective in the world."

Mr Beck waived the compliment aside with a big hand. "The luckiest if you like, sergeant," he muttered, and the great detective actually blushed.

"My luck, such as it is, is at your ladyship's service," he added, bowing.

"But your fishing, Mr Beck, and the big trout under the twisted elm? We overheard the sergeant, you know, as we came up the lane."

"The big trout must wait," he said, "when there are bigger fish to be caught. There is no time to lose, my lady."

Then the girl found a new quality—a sudden alert briskness in the detective's eyes and voice. He had spoken to her, but as he spoke he glanced inquiringly at Roland.

"My intended husband," said Lady Winifred, graciously. "He knows all about it. Tell him, Roland."

With an American's curt clearness Roland told the story, Mr Beck listening intently without question or comment. "He was caught in a trap, you see," concluded Roland, "there is no way out of the garden except into the yard."

"And out of the yard?"

"No way unless he flew."

"How did you come?"

"Oh, I drove out through the gate in my motor, of course."

"Just so," said Mr Beck, drily.

Roland looked surprised at this question and answer. "Don't let us lose time," he said eagerly; "I've got to take you back as quick as the motor can carry us to Alwood; if you'll come, that is."

"We'll go first to the motor, anyway," said the placid Mr Beck, "then—we'll see."

The motor, with its bright crimson morocco cushions, and its big brass lamps glaring in the sunshine in discordant contrast to the green and white of the hedgerow, challenged the detective's admiration.

"A fine car," said Mr Beck, with the quick, appreciative glance of the expert. Then he went round to the back, and, stooping, peered at the grey layer of mud on the road between the motor and the hedgerow.

"As I thought," he said sharply. Plainly he had found what he sought for; he straightened himself and beckoned to Roland.

"See," he said, and pointed.

Roland and the sergeant and the girl behind him

looked intently where he pointed, and all six eyes saw nothing but the grey mud of the road.

Mr Beck's forefinger came down closer to the surface. Then they saw two small marks, about a yard apart, in the grey mud—one fainter than the other—two small half-circles with lines across.

"The toes of ribbed rubber-soled shoes," Mr Beck explained quietly. "You carried the burglar and his bag with you from Alwood, Mr Parker, under the back seat of your motor."

"By Jove!" cried Roland, "you don't say so. What a plucky devil! If we had only caught him."

"Lucky you didn't," commented Mr Beck, drily. "The fellow had a revolver and knew how to use it." He glanced quickly at Lady Madcap, who stood wide-eyed with startled surprise at this strange discovery.

Roland caught the look, and his bronzed cheek paled at the thought of what might have happened.

"What next?" he asked, eager for action.

Mr Beck answered the question with another to the sergeant. "How far to the nearest railway station?"

"Five short miles, straightforward."

"When does the next train start?"

The sergeant consulted a silver turnip. "Thirty-five minutes, sir," he answered; "a fast train goes through to London."

"Right," cried Mr Beck, cheerily. "Time enough and to spare. Jump in all three. Stay! Just one moment to make quite sure."

He crossed the road, pushed his head and shoulders through the hedgerow with his eyes on the rank

grass beyond, and was back in a moment. "All right," he said again, "the fellow has gone on." Then, as he climbed in beside the girl in the back seat, "Now, Mr Parker, straight for the railway station. Let her rip."

Roland was a bit awkward at starting, and a minute was lost before they got under way. But the big car soon gathered speed.

The sharp wind which blew in their faces rose to a gale against the rush of the car. They had not gone half a mile when at a word from Mr Beck they stopped to pick up a light grey tweed cap which lay on the road.

"Why did the owner leave it there?" queried Lady Winifred, curiously, as Mr Beck, cap in hand, stepped back into the car.

"Blew off over the fence," Mr Beck explained curtly. "Didn't want to leave footmarks in the road coming after it."

A minute later the rhythmic throb of the machine was broken by spasmodic jerks, and it came slowly to a standstill, shivering through its big bulk like a wounded beast. Mr Beck grabbed the toolbag, and was out and under the machine in a moment.

He emerged presently, his broad waistcoat a plaster of mud, a black grease stain across his face.

"All right," he cried to Roland, "a fly got into the spraying nozzle and choked it." He showed a tiny damp dot on his forefinger. "Small thing to hold up an eighty-horse-power car."

Even as he spoke the great car crept smoothly into motion.

But their troubles were not yet over.

As they swept round a long curve, Roland suddenly shouted, and put the brakes down. But it was Mr Beck who, leaning across, threw the machinery out of gear. Only just in time. The front wheels stopped not twenty paces from a man in a light tweed cycling suit, who lay bareheaded prone on the road, with a smashed bicycle beside him. A black bag was strapped awkwardly to the handle-bar of his machine.

"Got him!" shouted Roland, triumphantly, as he plunged his hand into the black bag, and drew out a small gold cup and a jewel-case from a jumble of underclothing.

"Poor fellow! Is he dead?" asked Lady Winifred.

Mr Beck was bending over the prostrate man, with his hand over his heart.

"No, not dead, my lady; nor like to die," he said gravely. "It was a close shave, though."

"This is no bicycle accident, Mr Parker," he added; "more like an attempted murder. There was nothing to throw the bike down on this smooth track. That machine was broken up deliberately, battered down on the road, and trampled on."

"We've got the right man, anyhow," persisted Roland.

"Not a bit of it," said Mr Beck. "This poor chap is an innocent victim."

"But the cap, Mr Beck, the black bag, and the things I found in it."

"The cap was stolen by the thief," Mr Beck explained, "the black bag, and the few things in it were left behind by the thief. See this cap I found

on the road is three sizes too large for this poor fellow's head. We have a clever and dangerous man to deal with, Mr Parker. I can see what happened as well as if I had been an eye-witness. Our man wanted a cap for one thing. He wanted to throw pursuit off the scent for another. Here was a chance. He called to the bicyclist from the roadside, pretended that he was hurt, no doubt. When this foolish Samaritan dismounted to help him he knocked him down. See this cut to the bone on the right temple. A ring did that. See the bump on the back of the poor chap's head where it met the road. Look at the track on the mud, where the scoundrel dragged the body across from the side to the centre, covering up his own footmarks at the same time.

"A neat piece of work," commented Mr Beck, "a very neat piece of work, and all on the spur of the moment. More proof," he added, as he picked up a little spiral white rag, bloodstained through and through. "Our man cut his finger with the window glass. This is what he tied it up with."

But even while he rapped out these quick, sharp sentences, Mr Beck's hands were not idle. He had brought the cyclist back to the grassy bank on the roadside, propped him up comfortably, and forced some brandy and water, drop by drop, through his tight-clenched teeth. It was a long ten minutes before the man gave the slightest sign of returning life. Then his lips quivered with a noiseless sigh, and a faint colour showed in his cheek.

"He'll do now," cried Mr Beck, who had watched and waited impatiently. "We will leave him and

the brandy flask in your charge, sergeant. He'll come through all right, and we'll be back in twenty minutes to take him to the police-station." He pulled out his watch. "God bless my soul, we're nearly late. Jump in, Mr Parker, and let her rip! Full speed! Never mind the law!" And they slid down a long slope and climbed the opposite hill with a rush.

Too late! The train went panting out of the station as the motor pulled up abruptly at the entrance.

Mr Beck's placidity had disappeared. He was out and on the platform in a moment in eager conversation with the station-master.

"You've got a burglar on board your train," he said, "and a would-be murderer. Wire to stop it at the next station. Small, wiry man with bicycle bag, wearing cap two sizes too small for him, diamond ring on left hand, has cut finger tied with a strip of handkerchief. Don't stand looking at me, man! Wire at once!"

The station-master went off like a shot, but was back in a moment with dismay writ plain on his broad face.

"The wires are cut," he gasped.

Mr Beck growled like a dog when a bone is snatched from between his teeth.

"I might have guessed it," he grumbled; "the clever devil has taken no chances. Have you located the break?"

"No. It is nowhere near the station."

"He must have climbed the telegraph pole a mile or two outside, and probably broke the non-conductor

as well. It would take too long to find the break and tap the wire. How far to the next station where the train stops? "

"Twenty-seven miles," said the station-master. "It's a big town, Warmington. You see, sir, if I had only known beforehand I could—"

The station-master never told what he could have done, for Mr Beck was out beside the motor before his sentence was finished.

"Man gone," he cried, "and wires cut. What's your car, Mr Parker? Seventy horse-power, eh? "

"Eighty," said Roland, proudly.

"Then we may do it yet, Mr Parker. Will you trust your car with me for a couple of hours? I'm going to try to overhaul that train."

"You may have the car," said Roland, shortly, "but I go too. I'm bound to see this thing through."

"All right. Kindly step out, Lady Winifred; we'll come back for you."

"No! " said Lady Madcap.

"But, Winnie," began Roland.

"Don't lose time arguing, sir. I won't stir a step. You cannot drag me out. You'll be late if you stand there talking."

"If she will she must," said Mr Beck, and jumped into the car.

"I take a back seat this time," said Roland. "Come over here, Winnie, and hold on tight." He suited the action to the word. "Now, Mr Beck !"

The car turned the corner smoothly and faced out into the long, smooth road. Far off a thin trail of white smoke showed against the pale blue of the

morning sky. The train had got a two miles' start. Like a restive horse when the reins are slackened, the huge motor went off with a sudden plunge that made the two behind jump in their seats, and drew a little smothered scream from the girl.

"Don't, Roland, don't!" she pouted, "don't squeeze me. I'm not a bit nervous; it's glorious, glorious!"

The car gathered speed. It was flying. The wind that was at their back when they started grew into a fierce gale in their faces. Dimly they saw the grey road slide under the rushing wheels like the water of a torrent unimaginably swift. The hedges on either side, like long, green walls, raced by them. A steep incline showed vaguely in the distance. They had topped its ridge and were rushing down the slope.

What is that black blot on the vague line of the long, straight road? Before thought could frame the question they were by the market cart, with a dim vision of an angry man shaking his whip at them as they passed. Faster and faster! The wheels no longer rolled, they bounded like a greyhound on his stride, leaving a broken trail on the grey crust of the road. Once when they flashed over the sharp ridge of a culvert, they felt the huge monster go sheer into the air like a leaping horse, and land with a thud five paces forward.

The thin line of smoke which had vanished as they started again showed faint on the horizon's edge as they swept in a hurricane up the slope of a high hill. Faster and faster till it seemed they would shoot over the crest into space. They lost sight of the

smoke as they slid down into the valley, but they found it again, longer and thicker, at the next rise of the ground. The road curved inwards and then ran for three miles parallel with the railway line.

Now the trail of smoke is almost straight ahead and very near. The rushing car is gaining on the train, closer and closer it creeps till it is level with the rearmost carriage. Slowly as a snail they seemed to crawl along the line of carriages, though the car is racing at the rate of sixty miles an hour. They are level with the engine at last; they have passed it, when a curve of the road sweeps them once more apart.

"Two miles more! We'll do it yet," gasped Mr Beck, and the words were blown back to those behind by the rush of the wind. But fast upon the words there followed a despairing cry.

The car came round a corner on two wheels, the others spinning in the air. The road stretched long and straight in front, but the despairing cry broke from the driver's lips when he saw a railway level crossing right before him. Even as he spoke, the long gates closed with a clang across the road, to guard the approaching train.

The motor brakes went down hard, the car jarred and jolted as it slid with the fierce momentum of its former speed down the smooth slope to the opposing barrier. So fast it went before the brakes could hold, it struck and bulged the strong steel of the gates.

In that moment, as if the sudden stopping had shot him from the car, Mr Beck was out and over the gate and on to the line. A vivid red silk handkerchief waved in his hand.

The approaching engine yelled out a fierce long cry of warning and menace, but Mr Beck held his ground. The train brakes grasped and rasped and squeaked upon the wheels, and before he stepped off the lines the huge train came grumbling to a stand.

"In the name of the law," he whispered blandly to the cursing engine-driver as he passed him. "You've a man that's wanted for burglary and attempted murder. I'll have him out in a moment and signal you again."

From every carriage window heads protruded and voices cried to him. But Mr Beck's quick eyes fastened upon one face alone. It was a pale, handsome face at the window of a first-class carriage. A tweed cap two sizes too small was perched on the head. The first finger of the hand that rested on the window-sash was tied with a strip of blood-stained linen; on the third finger there glittered a diamond ring.

"A break-down, porter?" cried the man to Mr Beck. "No danger, I suppose?"

"Great danger!" grunted Mr Beck; "get out at once."

The man stooped for a bicycle bag that lay on the seat beside him, and opened the door with the bag in his hand.

Then, seeing no one else had moved, he hesitated and would have gone back.

But a sudden grip on his collar jerked him, bag and all, headlong out of the carriage and flung him on his back. Mr Beck signalled the engine-driver, and with a storm of impatient snorts the train trailed itself round a curve and vanished.

At that moment Lady Madcap and her lover came

rushing across the line, abandoning the quivering motor at the gate.

The fallen man picked himself up and turned with quiet fury on Mr Beck.

" This is an outrage," he hissed; " you have made some damnable blunder, and you'll pay dearly for it. Here is my card! "

" No you don't," said Mr Beck, quietly. He caught the man's wrists with a sudden grip like a steel trap, and drew from his breast pocket the right hand and the revolver it held. The weapon dropped harmless on the ground as Mr Beck jerked the man's wrists together, and there was a glimmer and click of steel as the handcuff catch snapped.

Lady Madcap screamed.

" It's all right, my lady," said Mr Beck, soothingly. " I think you will find your pretty nick-nacks safe in bicycle bag."

THE END

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